# CARTERET'S CURE

By RICHARD KEVERNE

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*By*

RICHARD KEVERNE

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## CHAPTER I

### I.

"I CAN'T cure you; no doctor can cure you. Your cure is beyond the powers of medical science."

Michael Carteret winced as he tried to look calmly into the queer, flint-grey eyes of the specialist.

"You mean——" he began anxiously, but with an effort to keep his voice level.

Sir Robert Sark, the famous neurologist, the man admitted at the moment to be the greatest authority in the whole country on nervous diseases, gave a short impatient laugh.

"Oh, good Lord, man! I don't mean that at all. I don't say you can't be cured; I say I can't cure you. Doctors can't cure you. Only you can cure yourself. But the point is, will you try?"

Michael Carteret felt suddenly weak; the relief was so intense. But it was a cruel jest of Sir Robert's, yet one quite in keeping with the man's reputation. The world said of him that he was absolutely without sympathy, that he prided himself upon his callous manner. But all the same, he worked miracles when all other help had failed.

As Carteret's sense of relief passed he felt nettled.

"Of course I'll try. Why else do you think I come to you?" he replied with a touch of annoyance.

The specialist's sphinx-like eyes rested upon the younger man with seeming indifference.

"My dear Mr. Carteret," he said, "this room is filled every day with men and women—mostly women—who pay me big fees to give them advice they refuse to take. But that's their affair, not mine."

Carteret felt the indefinable magnetism of the man as he spoke. He seemed big, careless of any judgment but his own. He sat in a shabby leather-covered armchair pushed a foot or two back from an almost bare writing-table. A shaded light, that fell—intentionally—upon the patient's face, left him in the shadow, which somehow accentuated his high cheekbones and gave him a touch of the Oriental in his square, powerful face. Carteret saw him at that moment as a fair-haired idol, impassive, immensely patient, and steeped in a tremendous knowledge of all things good and evil.

"It is a fact," the specialist went on, "that most of my patients don't want to be cured. That is to say, when the cure is pointed out to them they prefer the disease."

"I am not one of those patients," Carteret interrupted impatiently.

A flickering smile, incredulous and amused, touched the doctor's hard mouth.

"I am delighted to hear it. But I don't believe it—yet," he answered uncompromisingly.

Irritated by the arrogance of the man, Michael Carteret rose. It was exasperating after months of worry, sleeplessness, and fear of an impending breakdown, to be treated in this perfectly unfeeling way by the man to whom he had come, full of hope, for relief.

"Have you any suggestion to offer?" he asked with a note of irony.

Sir Robert leaned forward and for the first time appeared interested. He ignored the question and began to sum up his patient's condition judicially.

"Physically you are perfectly sound—fitter than most men of your age and intellect. Your trouble is overwork. You must choose between your work and your sanity."

Again Michael Carteret winced at the direct brutality of the words.

"I know your reputation well, Mr. Carteret. They call you one of the most brilliant young men at the Bar, just as they call me the most brilliant neurologist. Perhaps they are wrong in both cases." The hard grey eyes softened for just an instant. "But you have the advantage of a distinguished father. That I never had. Your father is a judge, mine was a dentist—and a quack at that. But my point is: You must abandon all your briefs, all your work—for all I know, all your income. You must take at least three months' rest, the sort of rest that will drive you frantic with boredom."

"And where am I to find this rest? Do you want me to go to a country hotel or something of that kind?"

"Good heavens, no! That's simply exchanging the scene. You would live much the same sort of life there that you do in London. Only a less intelligent one. I'm going to advise you to go to the home of an old friend of mine, Dr. Rafe Adam, at Salthithe. It's a Heaven-forgotten place in the midst of dreary saltings on the East Coast. It's twelve miles from a station, and Adam's other patients will get on your nerves to such an extent that they will drive you out to the marshes in self-defence."

Sir Robert gave a hard, chuckling laugh as if he enjoyed the gloomy prospect he outlined.

Carteret looked distressed.

"Do you mean to say this is a—a mental home?" he asked in alarm.

"Yes. Pretty nearly. But don't worry; you're not so bad as the others. Adam will have nothing much to do for you except shoo you out into the open air. He keeps quite a good table, and if you are fond of wild-fowl shooting you can have your fill of it at Salthithe. Well, which are you going to choose?"

"I—I'll go, of course," Carteret answered reluctantly.

"Good! I'll telephone Adam to expect you, and you'd better get off to-night. Go to Ipswich, and he'll send a car over for you."

"To-night! But I—I must settle up things first."

Sark raised his hands in despairing gesture. He looked plainly bored and partly disgusted.

"Yes. They all say that," he replied. "But I tell you you are your own doctor. The responsibility is yours."

"Then I'll take it," Carteret said with sudden anger. "You can tell Dr. Adam that I will be there to-morrow afternoon. I will carry out your advice as far as I can: I will cut all my work save one consultation in about ten days' time, and I'll go and be bored, for I want to get fit again if it's only to avoid another interview like this."

Sir Robert Sark laughed tolerantly as he rose to his feet. The young man facing him stood a clean six feet in his socks, but he was overtopped by three inches. The doctor flung out his hand.

"The Warren, Salthithe, is the address," he said blandly. "You'll hate it; but take it as a medicine. I sometimes take the same medicine myself for a week-end. It's nasty, but it does me good. Good-afternoon, Mr. Carteret; we may meet at Salthithe before long; I shall look forward to hearing your impressions."

He dropped back into his shabby chair and began to scribble notes in a diary, and Michael Carteret, angry and confused, and just a little frightened, went out into the muggy rain that seeped through the gathering darkness upon gloomy Harley Street that autumn afternoon.

## II.

The Warren was a vast, rambling, overgrown bungalow sort of place with extensive gardens sloping down to the shore of Walm Harbour, that great tidal estuary that eats into the Suffolk coast. The house was quite modern and in curious contrast to the quaint, ancient structures that made up the decayed port of Salthithe.

Dr. Rafe Adam had enlarged the house materially since he came, eighteen months before, to start his Home for Nervous Patients.

Adam himself was a genial fellow, liked by the neighbourhood. A keen sportsman with a broad mind, a perfect bedside manner, and a carelessness about collecting his bills, he carried on an almost honorary general practice among the penurious fisherfolk of Salthithe, but left the paying patients to old Dr. Cheyney, an obsolete practitioner who had been in the village for forty years and more, a favour which Cheyney vastly appreciated.

Rafe Adam came into his drawing-room on a wet November afternoon and announced to his 'guests,' as he always called them:

"We have a new visitor arriving shortly—that brilliant Mr. Michael Carteret, the barrister. Sir Robert has advised him that he needs a little of our good Salthithe air to refresh him."

He beamed upon some half-dozen 'guests' waiting anxiously the arrival of tea.

The room was wide and low, but cheerful. A bright fire of logs blazed in the open hearth. Big oil-lamps spread a mellow light upon bright chintzes, well-polished mahogany, and Alden sporting prints that decorated the walls. In the corner the black trumpet of a loud speaker threw back the flickering light of the fire. The guests roused themselves from their general air of boredom to answer the doctor.

"Not *the* Mr. Carteret!" a faded, restless-eyed woman of uncertain age responded brightly, putting down a crossword puzzle she was worrying out.

"Yes, *the* Mr. Carteret," the doctor replied complacently. "We shall have to be careful."

His weather-beaten face beamed.

"I was at Balliol with his father—the judge," a soured, lean man commented from the far corner.

"Indeed," the doctor said with professional cheerfulness. "Then you will have something in common."

A woman had entered the room as the doctor was speaking.

"Michael Carteret?" she queried. "Anyhow, he ought to have some brains."

The other guests glared at the speaker, a tall, attractive woman past her first youth, with rather colourless fair hair and a bored manner. "You know, Dr. Adam," she went on, "the trouble with this place is we get too much rest. I've walked for three hours to-day and I've only met four people. And they talked a tongue I couldn't understand. Oh, I talked to them all; I'd talk to anybody in this forsaken spot."

With perfect self-assurance she returned the hostile stares of her companions and turned to a taciturn wiry man whose eyes had not left his book.

"Perhaps he knows all about birds, Mr. Pell," she said provocatively.

"Indeed I hope so, Lady Sophie," the little man replied mildly.

He went back to his reading with an apologetic air. Lady Sophie Vizard sat down, yawning.

"Must we wait tea for the new victim?" she asked.

"Victim! Lady Sophie! Victim! Mr. Pell, what do you think of that?"

The doctor smiled tolerantly upon the room and made a little gesture of mock amazement.

Mr. Bernard Pell's childlike brown eyes lifted in surprise.

"I'm afraid I don't know what to think, doctor," he answered, embarrassed.

The others sniggered. Mr. Pell was their common joke. Each thought the other quite mad, but all agreed that little Pell was the maddest. He was bird mad, and talked and thought of nothing but birds, and spent hours alone on the marshes observing strange fowl through his binoculars.

Dr. Rafe Adam's quick ears caught the sound of an approaching car.

"Of course we shan't wait," he said with conviction. "Will you ring, Miss Collin?"

The faded lady rang the bell, and with the arrival of tea Michael Carteret entered The Warren to begin his cure. His heart sank as he was ushered into that drawing-room. He looked about him self-consciously. Questioning eyes met him everywhere, strange wild eyes that looked suspiciously upon him. Only the badger-haired Mr. Pell refused to be interested.

Carteret stood gazing timidly at the scene. He looked curiously young then for his thirty years. His face was flushed with the wind, and the tired eyes, that could at times wrinkle in whimsical jest, appeared strained and afraid. His light brown hair was a little disordered, and his strong straight mouth quivered, though hardly perceptibly.

Dr. Adam greeted him:

"Come on in, my dear Mr. Carteret; you'll be glad of a cup of tea after your cold drive."

And Michael Carteret, horribly scared by Sir Robert's serious diagnosis of his case, steeled to accept whatever cure was prescribed, had not the courage to say that he would much rather have a whisky-and-soda and meet nobody.

Instead, he answered with assumed carelessness:

"Of course. I'd love it."

The doctor, with tact, piloted him to a far corner and began an easy, commonplace conversation.

"Don't let your fellow-guests distress you, Mr. Carteret," he said confidentially. "You're not in their category, Sark tells me. My instructions are to let you see as little of the inside of this house as possible. He wants you bored, mentally, and tired out physically. A queer devil, Sark, but no one can touch him. How did he strike you? Did you want to hit him?" Rafe Adam looked up with a quizzical smile.

Carteret was beginning to feel more at ease.

"As a matter of fact, I thought him the most unsympathetic brute I've ever come across," he answered dryly.

Adam laughed heartily.

"That's his pose," he said. "If you had to deal with as many neurotic women as he has, you'd grow hard too. He's a first-rate chap really."

"I find it hard to believe," Carteret replied.

Rafe Adam rose, with an amused twinkle in his blue eyes.

"Well, well, we shall see," he said. "Now look here, I'm going to send Lady Sophie over to talk to you. She'll interest you. She's a product of the age—typical."

"How?" asked Carteret.

"She's Lord Appledore's daughter, and she's also 'Madame England.'"

"What! That swagger Dover Street dressmaker?"

"The same. The Appledores are poor as church mice, and when her husband, young Vizard, died she took her coat off and went to work. She's made a small fortune already."

"From what I've heard of her prices, I don't wonder," Carteret smiled.

"She is brilliantly clever," Adam said with appreciation, "but she overdid it. The same old story—breakdown, Sark, here. And now she's pretty nearly fit again. You'll find her most amusing. Lady Sophie!"

Sophie Vizard turned in her chair, and Carteret jumped to his feet.

"Lady Sophie, come and play hostess to Mr. Carteret, will you, for a few minutes? Mr. Carteret, let me present you to Lady Sophie Vizard. Lady Sophie, Mr. Carteret thinks less of Sir Robert's manners than you do. Tell him your experience."

The doctor moved away, and Michael Carteret found himself being regarded by a pair of humorous grey-green eyes, and heard an attractive voice announcing calmly:

"I told Sir Robert Sark that he was a cad, and I only proposed to take his advice to satisfy myself that he was a humbug too. He didn't seem to mind, and I'm almost sorry that I can't say he's a humbug. This dreary spot has cured me. It will cure you too; it's so intolerably dull you've got to get well in self-defence."

" You encourage me," Carteret answered lightly.

" You'll need encouragement," she laughed. And then for twenty minutes she entertained him with biting yet amusing comments upon life at The Warren and the appalling dulness of its inmates.

### III.

Summing up the situation after a sleepless night, Michael Carteret decided that the only bright spot in life was Sophie Vizard.

He had sat next to her at dinner overnight. While the other guests ate the excellent meal The Warren provided in gloomy silence, he and Lady Sophie had got along remarkably well.

" Watch the other victims hating us," she had said to him in an undertone, and glancing down the table he had met the critical glare of four pairs of angry eyes. Only Mr. Bernard Pell, the bird man, showed any lack of interest in him. He was engaged at the moment in talking of avocets to the inattentive Miss Collin.

Later, Mr. Pell tackled Carteret on the subject of curlews, and Carteret soon regretted that he had displayed any knowledge of birds. Mr. Pell was indefatigably dreary in his long-winded theories.

He spent the morning pottering about Salthithe and growing more and more depressed. The place well merited its guide-book description of 'a decayed borough.' Carteret was no antiquary, and a ruined castle and an unusually fine Norman church had little attraction for him. And that was the brightest Salthithe could produce.

He wandered back to lunch to find that Sophie Vizard was absent; she had gone, they told him, for a long walk across Hithe Heath, a barren waste of gorse and bracken that stretched away for miles to the north. Carteret had to suffer the lean and soured Mr. Archibald's reminiscences of Balliol in the late 'seventies throughout that dismal meal.

The short afternoon drew to its close with a keen north-wester sending ragged clouds across an ice-clear sky. Carteret thought of tea at The Warren without Lady Sophie and shuddered.

He was going to be bored all right, he told himself bitterly, and already he found himself debating in despair how to kill the four hours before dinner and the prospect of a little intelligent conversation with Lady Sophie.

High up a flight of duck passed across the wind-swept sky. That solved his problem for him. He would get his gun and see if he could not find a little sport in the harbour creeks. Half an hour later, Michael Carteret was afloat on Walm Harbour.

A short half-mile below Salthithe, the sluggish River Walm widens suddenly into the vast expanse of Walm Harbour, with its two marshy islands, Widgey and Pool. Carteret had a few words with the man in charge of The Warren's boats and, at his suggestion, set out to cross to Widgey, a mile away.

The channel was deep and well marked, and with the falling tide Carteret soon made a landing, and tramped through the coarse grass of the island with a thoroughly new sense of well-being upon him. A couple of teal, bagged, and some wild duck that rose too far off for a shot, were all he saw worth shooting at.

In a tantalizing way, Pool Island, about another mile nearer the mouth of the harbour, seemed to be full of birds. It was early yet; Carteret determined to pull across there and see if he could not find better luck. And at Pool his sport was so good that darkness was coming on before he realized that it was time to be getting back.

He set himself with a will to the long pull homewards against a now much swifter tide rushing towards the narrow mouth, but before long he began to regret, despite his excellent bag, that he had come so far.

Rowing the heavy dinghy was a heart-breaking job, and his hands were soft and his muscles out of condition. Presently he got into the main stream and for some minutes, in spite of his utmost exertion, could make no headway against the ebb. He was, in fact, he saw through the gathering gloom, being swept sideways towards the southern shore of the harbour, a shore now fringed with murky mud flats with no light of habitation anywhere.

And then Michael suddenly realized that he was physically done; he had rowed himself out. The prospect was not a pretty one. In that mill-race of a current he would soon be at sea, and already the dull roar of the breakers on the bar at the mouth of the harbour came to him ominously through the darkness.

There was only one thing for it; he must try to get the boat on the mud and wait there for the turn of the tide. He summoned his last strength, and with hands now chafed and bleeding, he managed to edge the boat nearer and nearer the slimy ooze. Once she touched and was swept off; again she touched, and to Carteret's intense relief she stayed firm. He fell forward on his oars, panting.

His first feelings were of immense thankfulness. He had escaped an almost certain death. Now all he would have to do was to make the best of things for four or five hours. But those hours went very slowly. The keen wind that rushed across the harbour cut him to the bone. He crouched in the bottom of the boat trying to get what shelter he could, but it made little difference.

The night was full of the mournful, eerie cries of birds. Stars, clear and glistening, blinked in the cold heavens, to be eclipsed momentarily as some great mass of cloud swept wildly across the sky from the north-west. Suddenly a bitter rain shower blotted out the lights of the farther shore and soaked him through. It had passed in ten minutes, but it left him yet more miserable. He dropped into a listless doze, and was awakened by another icy downpour.

Presently he thought of The Warren. What were they thinking there? Might they not have sent out a search for him? The thought cheered him, and his mind went to his gun. He would fire a signal of distress.

With stiff hands he seized the weapon and fired three shots in quick succession. A whirring of wings, from a flight of birds feeding on the mud close by, greeted the first. After a few minutes he fired again, then listened feverishly for a longed-for answer. But none came. Carteret gave himself up to despair.

But suddenly he sat up. From far away there seemed to come the plash of oars. He cried out wildly.

Through the still night a faint voice replied:

"Who are you? Where are you?"

Frantically he searched his pockets for a match, fearing that when he found it it would be wet. But he managed to strike one and light an old letter, while he called again to his unknown rescuer. Through the gloom a dark figure appeared, walking on pattens across the mud.

"Who are you?" a voice asked.

He answered that he was a visitor and how he had come to his present plight, and even as he spoke, exhausted, bewildered, and glad with returning hope, he was conscious of sheer amazement as he saw that his rescuer was a woman.

"How long you been here?" she asked in the accent of the country. Her voice was musical and deep, with a queer, alluring, husky note in it. He tried to pierce the darkness to catch a glimpse of her, but as he gazed he was blinded momentarily by the light of an electric torch that flashed into his face.

"Dear heavens," she went on swiftly, "you're nigh froze to death."

He felt suddenly feeble.

"Yes, I—I am a bit done up," he answered.

She was by the side of the boat now, flashing her light about the dinghy, then back to his face.

"You'd be one of Dr. Adam's patients, I suppose," she commented. "And a Londoner, too. They didn't ought to have let you out alone like this."

Carteret thought he detected the tinge of scorn in the peasant voice for 'one of Dr. Adam's patients.' It hurt. He answered a trifle bitterly:

"Yes, I am at The Warren. But this is my fault; I ought to have known better than to go fooling about a strange harbour after nightfall."

"Yes, you did," the girl responded frankly. "Tide won't be back over these flats before midnight, and by then, by the look of you, you'd have been dead."

"That looks like what's going to happen to me, anyway," he said dejectedly. "How on earth can I get ashore?"

"Get out they bottom boards from your boat," she said gruffly. "I'll show you."

Carteret obeyed as best as his weak, stiff arms would let him, and with infinite patience and care this girl from the darkness helped him from board to board over the treacherous mud. Fortunately they had not far to go. Unknown to Michael Carteret, a narrow hardway led from the marshy shore to the deep water channel but thirty odd yards from his stranded boat.

When at last his feet touched solid earth, his strength left him, and he swayed and nearly fell on the weed-covered stones.

The girl was by his side in a moment, and there was a kinder note in her deep voice as she said :

"Hold up now, hang on to me."

He seized her strong arm and steadied himself.

"I didn't realize I was so weak," he murmured apologetically, his teeth chattering with cold. "It's—it's silly to say how grateful I am to you. Why, you've saved my life. If there's a house or anything near here, if you would help me to it——"

She laughed—a queer little husky laugh.

"House! There's no house on these saltings save old Dyke Farm, and that's empty. You come along with me before you talk about saving lives. Come, now."

There was something peremptory about her last words. "Reckon I'll have to get you home somehow," she added.

She helped him along the slimy path, then over an earthen bank at the fringe of the mud, and by a tortuous way across the marshland until they came to a dilapidated gate.

"Wait here," she commanded, and disappeared into the darkness.

In a minute she was back at his side.

"Here, drink this," she said, pouring out a cup of hot tea from a vacuum flask.

He gulped it eagerly.

"Thanks so much, that makes me feel better," he said as the hot liquid brought new warmth to him.

She opened the gate, saying: "You'll have to walk a bit farther."

He stumbled to his feet, and in a few moments found that she had brought him to a rough lane, and, to his utter amazement, the light of her torch, which she used to guide his feet, showed up a waiting motor-car.

The girl bade him get in and covered him with a coarse rug. He was too weak to ask questions then, but he pondered in a dazed, fevered sort of way the extraordinary circumstances of the past half-hour as the car, a ramshackle thing, lurched and jolted through the night.

It was not until they had been going some time that he realized that they were driving without lights. He watched the dim form in the seat ahead with fascination. There was poise about the head and something far from coarse about the broad shoulders. And she drove with consummate skill and as one who knew every inch of the country, checking for sharp turns, and speeding on through a country which showed to Carteret's tired eyes merely as a blurred, desolate waste of fen, with inky, reed-covered ditches bordering the narrow road.

It occurred to him that he had not yet seen this girl's face. He fell to wondering, in a sleepy sort of way, if she were dark or fair. Presently he fell asleep.

Her voice woke him. The night was still pitch dark, but the car had stopped and she had left her seat.

He heard her calling:

"Ferry! Ferry, ahoy!"

He dragged himself from the car as an answering hail came back.

She turned and saw him.

"You'll be all right now," she said. "Ferryman, he'll land you within ten minutes of Dr. Adam's house."

"Look here," he said eagerly, "how can I thank you? Who are you? I can never forget what you've done for me to-night."

She gave again the queer husky laugh.

"I don't want no thanks for getting a man off the mud. I've been there myself; I knows."

"But you've done more than that," he persisted. "You must tell me your name." Again he tried to catch a glimpse of her face, but she eluded his gaze.

She walked back to the car as the splash of the ferryman's oars came from the distant bank.

"Where can I find you to thank you properly?" he insisted.

She swung herself lightly into her seat.

"You have thanked me—all I want," she responded.

"But not all I want," he said. "Please do let me know who you are."

The car started with a grind of gears.

"You ask for Peggy Catchpole," she threw at him with a laugh as the car moved off. "Everyone knows Peggy Catchpole round here."

She had gone, swallowed up in the night. Carteret made his way slowly down to the water-side, shaken and bewildered.

"Do you know a Miss Catchpole, Peggy Catchpole?" he asked the taciturn ferryman a few moments later. "She's just saved my life and driven me here."

The man grunted.

"Peggy Catchpole, eh?" he said. "Yes, we all knows Peggy Catchpole round here, sir."

"Where does she live?" Carteret demanded eagerly.

"Well, that I can't rightly say, sir; but we all knows her."

And that was all Carteret could get out of the ferryman.

## IV.

Carteret spent the next few days in bed.

"It's purely a precautionary measure," Rafe Adam had explained. "By all the rules of the book you ought to have pneumonia, but, frankly, I can find nothing wrong with you. You must have the constitution of an ox."

He laughed in his bluff, genial way, adding: "Your fellow-guests will hate me for locking you up; they're seething with curiosity to know what happened."

And it was that that made Michael Carteret decide, arbitrarily, to keep his own secret about the mysterious girl of the marshes.

Somehow he resented the thought of those inquisitive folk downstairs chattering like a cage of parrots about Peggy Catchpole. If the girl made so light of what she had done, he was not going to have her name bandied about by this collection of 'patients' for which she had such obvious pity. Not until he had seen her again at any rate.

But those days in bed were days of wondrous peace for him, because, for the first time for months, the blessing of untroubled sleep was his once more. On the night of his adventure he had slept like a log for twenty hours, and since then a feeling of happy lassitude possessed him, and he knew rest such as he had seldom known since before the days of his ghastly crash in a Bristol Fighter, near Festubert, which had been the beginning of his nervous troubles. Hardly a night had passed since then but he had lived again something of that horror of the war.

Sophie Vizard came up to see him on the first day he was allowed out of bed, and he was delighted with her tact.

She hardly mentioned his adventure, once she realized that he did not wish to talk of it, but kept him amused with her scandalous exaggerations of the other 'victims,' and presently led away into commonplace things.

He told her that he was going up to London in a few days' time, and she laughed enviously.

"You lucky man! What wouldn't I give for just one night in town! Think of it—a theatre, some supper, and then a cabaret. Light, laughter, and sane people. Oh, the fun of it! When are you going, Mr. Carteret?"

"On Thursday, if I'm fit," he said. "But only for one night. I shall be back on Friday afternoon."

"How I'll envy you on Thursday," she responded. "Think of me here with little Pell and Archibald the Dreary. Think of the bright conversation at our table, while you—I suppose you'll make the best of it before you come back to prison."

He smiled.

"I expect I shall," he said; "but I'll think of you."

When he left for the station a couple of mornings later Sophie, wandering in the garden, shook her fist at him in mock hatred as the car drove off.

The business that took Carteret to town was purely personal. The son of an old friend had got himself into a rather discreditable mess with a fast set in Paris. Carteret had been handling the whole affair with the object of preventing scandal. And there was a final appointment to be kept, at his chambers, with a French lawyer.

But when he reached his rooms Carteret found a telegram from Paris to say that the Maître Sens had met with an accident which prevented him from travelling. Could Mr. Carteret postpone the appointment or would he so far incommode himself as to travel to Paris?

Carteret frowned. This was an infernal nuisance, but there was nothing for it but to cross the Channel. He was not going to interrupt his cure again, and, too, he found himself surprisingly anxious to get back to Salthithe. Peggy Catchpole had been in his mind a lot. He was going to find that girl.

He sent a wire to Adam to say that he would have to be away for two nights, and caught the afternoon boat-train from Victoria.

It was close on midnight before Carteret reached his hotel, and by then the old curse was back upon him. Tired, he felt no desire to sleep. Most heartily he regretted the mishap to the loquacious Maître Sens that had caused this unwelcome journey.

He wandered down from his room into the hotel café, gay and noisy with a careless, chattering throng, and over an innocuous drink he thought, with grim humour, of the contrast between this night and the last.

Miles away, remote little Salthithe was dreaming in its silence. He might have been asleep there. He thought of the marshes and the salt wind. The queer girl, Peggy Catchpole—where was she now? And Sophie Vizard? It would be rather a joke to send her a post-card from Paris; he had promised to think of her to-night.

The street door opened and a gust of fresh air pierced the fetid atmosphere of the café, causing Carteret to look up gratefully. A party of four had come in—two men, Frenchmen obviously, and two women, swathed in furs. They were in the best of spirits, laughing gaily over the mishap that had caught one of the men's coats in the swing door.

Carteret sprang to his feet, doubting his own eyes, for one of the women was Lady Sophie Vizard.

"Good Lord!" he said in amazement.

Lady Sophie caught his astonished gaze. She stiffened suddenly. There was, for an instant, an expression of suspicion and fear in her eyes. Then she recovered herself—Carteret was aware of the effort she made. She came towards him with her blandly cynical smile.

"You wicked man!" she said, with a knowing shake of the head. "So this is your business appointment! Mr. Carteret, I'd never have believed it of you."

In his surprise, Carteret responded:

"But, Lady Sophie, what about you? What on earth does this mean?"

"It means it's all your fault," she answered, talking with a feverish gaiety. "Your bad example." She cast a swift glance at her companions, who were settling themselves at a table and looking at her in undisguised surprise. "I flew over." She laughed nervously. "Just after you left——"

Carteret's attention wandered at the sound of a voice behind him. Lady Sophie's woman companion was speaking. In a deep musical voice she was saying:

"Oh, don't bother about Sophie; she's always meeting friends and being nice to them."

She laughed, and Carteret turned his head abruptly.

The girl was tall and athletic, with a purposeful wind-burned face crowned with a rebellious crop of rich chestnut hair. She was being helped out of her cloak by one of the men, and was looking down at him in amusement as he fumbled with her furs.

She was exquisitely dressed; even essentially masculine Michael Carteret was struck by the perfect taste of her frock.

"That's better," she said, patting her wayward hair with a shapely brown hand.

Lady Sophie was still talking on.

"Just after you left, I had a message——" she was saying. But Carteret was unconscious of her words.

For it had come to him suddenly that the deep, husky voice of this beautifully dressed woman but a few yards from him was the voice of the rough, country girl from the marshes, Peggy Catchpole.

"A message from Major Seymour," Lady Sophie went on briskly. "He's a sort of neighbour of ours at The Warren. You've not met him yet, Mr. Carteret."

Michael Carteret, in a state of mental bewilderment, let his eyes drift back to Sophie Vizard's animated face.

"Major Seymour? No—no, I've never heard of him," he answered blankly.

"But you will—oh, you will—he's a dear. I don't know what I should have done without him among all those devastating people at Dr. Adam's."

Lady Sophie dropped her bag with a clatter upon the parquet floor.

"Oh, how stupid of me!" she exclaimed, as the fragile thing burst open and a bunch of keys and a dozen coins rattled on the wood.

Carteret recovered himself swiftly and was down on his knees rescuing her scattered belongings.

"The mirror, Mr. Carteret, the mirror! Oh, don't tell me it's broken; I simply couldn't stand seven more years of bad luck."

He had to smile. It was so like her, he thought, to be concerned over so trivial a thing. He picked up the bag and fumbled in the flap for the precious piece of glass.

"No. All safe," he declared cheerfully from his knees. He passed the little mirror up for her inspection, and as he did so it seemed that her queer, grey-green eyes were flashing a message across the room. Then they turned on him swiftly, with a beam of gratitude.

"Thank you so much," she laughed. "You must think me awfully foolish to be so superstitious; but I am."

A couple of waiters had by now completed the work of salvage, and Sophie, with a gracious smile to each, sank limply into a chair, motioning Carteret into one opposite to her, with its back to the rest of her party.

"And now that excitement's over I'll continue my defence—that's the proper phrase, isn't it?" she laughed gaily.

"When there is anything to defend," Carteret responded lightly.

"Well, anyhow——" she smiled.

Lady Sophie talked for some minutes with an amazing vivacity; she kept her eyes fixed upon his, holding his attention, and making her quaintly humorous points the more effective with frequent little gestures of the hand.

There was nothing extraordinary about her explanation, although she made a fanciful romance of it. It was merely that Major Seymour's daughter, Mary, had been staying with friends near Paris, and that he, 'an old-fashioned, stodgy old dear,' as she described him, didn't like the idea of a young girl travelling alone.

"So we plotted," Sophie said with an engaging smile. "I told Dr. Adam that there was nobody who could go to fetch Molly home unless I went. It was all your fault; I'd never have dreamed of doing such a thing if you hadn't set me the bad example."

Carteret smiled quietly.

"And is that Miss Seymour with you?" he asked. "She certainly doesn't seem so timid that she couldn't travel back alone."

"Of course not, you stupid man. Can't you see it was all a put-up game to let me escape for a few hours—like you did? Molly *was* coming back alone; I only worked on the dear Major's feelings. But what about you? What's your defence?"

Carteret turned in his chair to get a glimpse of this mysterious Molly Seymour as he began:

"Oh, mine's quite genuine. Hallo!" he broke off suddenly, "your charge has deserted you."

Sophie nodded complacently.

"Yes, the poor dear's tired and bored with those two Frenchmen. They're relatives of the friends with whom she has been staying, and I think they have rather overwhelmed her with her gaiety. She's gone to bed."

Michael Carteret regarded the distant table, where the two men now sat, alone, sipping their liqueurs.

"And when I've got rid of them I am going too," Sophie added, stifling a yawn.

Carteret got up.

"Then perhaps we'll meet in the morning," he said. "We might travel back together."

"That would be fine," she answered. "We're going to fly."

Carteret winced as if he had been hurt.

"I'm sorry," he said grimly. "I was flying in the war and I had a ghastly crash. It's broken my nerve and—and—sent me to Dr. Adam, I suppose. It sounds an unpleasant thing to say, but I daren't."

There was real sympathy in Sophie Vizard's voice as she answered:

"Oh, you poor, poor man! I am so sorry."

# CHAPTER II

## 1.

A TIRESOME interview with Maître Sens the next morning, an uncomfortable journey back to London by the afternoon boat-train, and a sleepless night at the station hotel made Michael Carteret peculiarly glad to see Chipping Langham soon after noon on the Saturday.

Chipping Langham was the station for Salthithe, and he hired a local car to take him the twelve miles to The Warren. As the antiquated vehicle bumped and jolted over the little used roads, Carteret found himself noting, with amused interest, how different his feelings were now from those he had experienced when first he had made this journey.

Then, with every mile of the lonely road, his apprehension and gloom had grown deeper. Now he was anxious to get to his journey's end. The keen, salt tang of the air as they skirted the border of desolate Hithe Heath came welcome to his nostrils. There was sleep awaiting him at Dr. Adam's queer home. And there was a new interest in life.

This odd problem of Peggy Catchpole had to be solved. Carteret's trained legal brain was already worrying round all the circumstances with the zest of a master and the enthusiasm of an amateur.

Already his sense of reason had told him that the rough country girl of the saltings and that perfectly gowned girl, Molly Seymour, could not be the same. The hypothesis was absurd. The similarity of voices was interesting, but then both Major Seymour's daughter and Peggy Catchpole were probably born and bred in the same place, and that queer, husky note might be characteristic of the country. The girl in Paris spoke a pleasant cultured tongue; the girl of the marshes was rude as the salt flats themselves.

But there was a puzzle here, a puzzle which he meant to solve. Peggy Catchpole had saved his life without doubt, and made light of it. Michael's nature did not allow debts of that kind to go unpaid.

The car slowed as it reached the little town, turned abruptly into the drive of The Warren, and pulled up with a jolt at the door, where Rafe Adam's own car was standing.

It was a glorious sunny morning—cold in the wind, but in shelter, as warm as September. On the east side of the house, looking over the flats to the glistening harbour beyond, Dr. Adam's guests were sunning themselves while they waited for the luncheon gong to sound.

A small pile of luggage stood by the open door, and as Carteret entered the wide, airy hall he was aware of Lady Sophie engaged in an earnest conversation with Sir Robert Sark.

Sophie Vizard caught sight of him and left the specialist abruptly.

"Oh, it's you, Mr. Carteret, is it?" she said in distinct, level tones that seemed clearly to proclaim a hardly controlled anger. "I'm glad you got here before I went."

"But you're not going?" Carteret interrupted with a touch of disappointment.

"Indeed I am," she announced, a little break in her voice. "I cannot stand that man any longer." She nodded her head contemptuously towards where Sir Robert stood gazing impassively.

Carteret glanced up, embarrassed. Sir Robert acknowledged his presence with a wooden inclination of the head.

"I don't care whether he's the greatest doctor in the world or not," Sophie went on with passion. "He's an insufferable boor. He has had the impudence, if you please, to lecture me like a schoolchild because I had to go to Paris. The man's manners are impossible—simply impossible."

She fumbled with her gloves.

"But Dr. Adam?" Carteret queried weakly. "What does he say?"

He was feeling very uncomfortable. Lady Sophie's tirade against the man, standing within a few feet of her, was more than trying. Again he glanced awkwardly across to the grim, expressionless face. In the half shadow Sark's huge form and heavy, set features flashed him an impression of that wooden Hindenburg into which fanatical Germans hammered nails during the war.

Sophie Vizard sniffed with scorn.

"Oh, he's run away; he always does when this bully's about. He says: 'Dear Lady Sophie, you're jeopardizing your health.'" She mimicked Rafe Adam's conciliatory manner. "Then he fades away until the storm has blown over. Well, this storm is not going to blow over. I pay my doctors for advice, not for insolence. Mr. Carteret, would you mind carrying my bags to the car; the chauffeur, like his master, seems to have gone into hiding too."

For the first time, Sir Robert Sark's steady, metallic voice broke in.

"I think I told you, Mr. Carteret, that people habitually pay me large fees for advice they refuse to take. Lady Sophie is an example. Her entirely unnecessarily excited state proves what I have been telling her. Her journey to Paris has undone weeks of good work. If she persist in her childish obstinacy she may find herself in a very short time in a ' nursing home ' "—he stressed the words—" which she will not be allowed to leave without a certificate."

The meaning of the man's words were clear, but the callous insolence with which they were spoken infuriated Carteret. His earlier feelings of hostility to the specialist were increased manifold.

He shrugged his shoulders.

" Is this the luggage?" he said, turning to Lady Sophie.

" If you please," she answered sharply.

He saw her to the waiting car.

The missing chauffeur appeared a moment later, apologizing profusely. He lifted Lady Sophie's big trunk on to the roof of the car.

" Good-bye," she said to Carteret, with an unreal smile. " I hope I'll see you again. I'll write to you. And—and—hurt that beast Sark for me somehow, will you?"

He walked back to the house, indignant and confused, but when he entered the hall the grim figure of Sir Robert Sark had disappeared.

## II.

Carteret missed Sophie Vizard. He had been looking forward to her breezy conversation and to finding out from her something about Molly Seymour.

With Sir Robert he had but the briefest conversation that day. The specialist did not appear in the dining-room, but they met for a few seconds on the stairs.

Entirely ignoring the scene of the morning, Sark had announced in his brusque way :

"I hope you've settled down for your cure, Mr. Carteret. Dr. Adam gives me encouraging reports—of the little he's seen of you."

"Thank you. No, I shall not have to go away again," Carteret replied shortly.

"I imagine you did not sleep very well when you were away."

Carteret winced. There was something uncanny about the man. He knew too much.

"Not very well," he was forced to answer.

"Then stick to Salthithe," said Sark, moving on, his face as expressionless as ever.

Carteret mooned about Salthithe all the next day in a state of acute depression, made the worse by a cold, driving rain which persisted from dawn to dusk.

At table he became as taciturn and listless as the other patients, but in the evening fell, in despair, into conversation with Mr. Pell on the subject of wild geese.

Mr. Pell seemed grateful for the younger man's companionship, and said shyly, when at last Michael could support the talk no longer:

"Perhaps we might spend a few hours together on the saltings some day. Many rare fowl visit these waters. There is even the smew——"

"Ah! That would be intensely interesting," Carteret said heartily, as he escaped, having but the foggiest idea of what a smew was, nor very much desire to find out.

Rafe Adam caught him outside the door. He laughed knowingly.

"Utterly, completely, and entirely fed up, eh, Mr. Carteret? Come along into my study and have a whisky-and-soda while I try to convince you of the curative effects of absolute boredom."

"As long as you won't talk about fool birds I'll do anything," Michael answered, smiling with relief.

The doctor laughed again.

"Mr. Pell on mergansers, I suppose, or was it the nesting habits of barnacle geese?"

"Smews—whatever they are," Carteret said with a mild expletive.

"Well, say when," Adam replied, his hand on the siphon.

Adam was a genial soul, and they talked for an hour, mostly about Lady Sophie and, later on, about the Seymours.

They lived, father and daughter, Carteret learned, at Street Grange, near the mouth of Walm Harbour, and on the opposite side. Adam described the Major as a disappointed, cynical man who had been very hard hit by the war.

"The Grange is a tragedy," he said. "In '14 old Seymour had two or three thousand a year, I suppose. Now I doubt if he's got five hundred. The place is just going to rack and ruin. He and Molly live in two or three rooms, and he fools about pretending to farm what little land he's got left. But it's good only for sheep—and you know what sheep are if you can't afford to look after them."

Michael didn't, but he nodded. He was thinking hard at the moment what a queer thing it was that the daughter of so poverty-stricken a man should be wearing the gorgeous clothes which he had seen upon Molly Seymour in Paris. Also that it was funny that Sophie Vizard should describe Major Seymour as 'an old-fashioned, stodgy old dear.'

With the art of his calling—and Michael Carteret was one of the subtlest cross-examiners at the Bar—he extracted quite a lot of information before, at length, he went to his room. And there he spent half an hour over a map of the neighbourhood, and resolved upon a long and solitary walk on the morrow.

He set out, through a still driving rain, soon after breakfast. He was going to reconstruct, as he put it, the scene of his adventure on the mud flats. He wanted to find that hardway to which Peggy Catchpole had guided him, to find the gate near which her unexpected and unlighted car had been waiting. In fact, he had started to find Peggy herself.

There was no difficulty about following the road; none other existed in that dreary and desolate stretch of marsh. It was rough and grass-grown, in parts little more than a track.

Swampy fields, that merged into saltings, bordered the way after the first few miles. The road was as bare as a sea beach, and as little sheltered; there was not even a cottage or a cattle-shed to be seen, save in the far distance, where, amid a ragged clump of trees, the building which he identified as Dyke Farm showed vaguely against a rain-swept sky.

Carteret trudged on for an hour and a half, oppressed by the loneliness. What, he wondered, could anybody, least of all a girl with a motor-car, have been doing in this isolated place late at night?

Why? Why? Why?

The regular tramp of his feet upon the stony road seemed to beat out the question until it began to get on his nerves.

The country was so terribly deserted. It was foolish to imagine that he was being followed; any living creature bigger than a hare was visible on the bleak road for a mile either way. Yet several times Michael Carteret found himself looking swiftly, furtively over his shoulder.

Far away a hazy outline showed the village of Street. Some way beyond it an isolated blur indicated

Street Grange, the home of the Seymours. Behind, the rising ground told where his road dropped to the saltings from the tiny hill that lay between him and the Walm River. He was alone in a flat world of mist and marsh with but the rustle of the wind in the withering reeds of the dykes by the roadside to give an answering sound to the tramp of his heavy boots.

And yet again he looked round nervously. He felt that he was not alone.

"Nerves, my boy, nerves," he said aloud, as he stopped deliberately to light a pipe.

He started on again, whistling now, and the sound was somehow comforting.

He was almost up to Dyke Farm, and an uninviting and gloomy house it appeared. In a summer sun the golden-brown lichens on the tiled roof would have looked glorious, but under the leaden, dripping sky they seemed to tell only of neglect and decay.

The road bent sharply to the left as he approached Dyke, and he noted, with surprise, that he must have passed right by the house when Peggy Catchpole drove him home.

For a moment he hesitated by the rotting gate which led to the front door. Then he strode in.

Dyke Farm, at a close view, gave an even stronger impression of neglect than it had in the distance. Here was a place, it seemed, that nobody had approached for years. Windows were broken, floors rotting with damp, and repellent fungus growths spreading all about.

Carteret went round to the back. Coarse grass had grown knee-high in the farmyard. Broken doors swung loosely on rusted hinges. He started as a gust of wind swung to the mouldering window of an outhouse.

There was pathos in such desolation. He felt almost sorry for this old house which the world had deserted.

A feeling of curiosity overcome his previous fit of nerves. He tried a back door. It opened stiffly. No one had even troubled to lock it. With just one moment of apprehension, which he beat down angrily, Michael Carteret began to explore the lonely place. It reeked of decay; a stale mustiness was in the air. Paper drooped in dingy folds from sodden walls.

Upstairs it was a little drier, but there the sense of desertion was stronger. The house creaked strangely in the wind, and a sudden rustling noise—rats in the chimney, he told himself—made Carteret's skin suddenly tight and cold.

But he went on up into the attics, and here the silence and the feeling of loneliness was greater than ever. Suddenly the sense of being spied upon returned, and he had to fight down a swift and terrifying panic.

To break the eerie silence he kicked savagely at a door; and to his amazement it flew open, disclosing a little room cosily furnished.

On one side was a camp bed, with sleeping-bag and heavy brown blankets all neatly arranged. An oil-stove stood near a small table by a tiny window, hidden under the deep eaves, that looked over the harbour.

The room was warm. Instinctively he bent down and touched the stove. It burnt his hand.

On the table, by a lamp, was a vacuum flask. He opened it and the steaming aroma of hot tea greeted his nostrils.

Carteret stood up amazed. Was this the secret of Peggy Catchpole?

Intuitively he flung open the window and stretched out his head. An indistinct form was scurrying swiftly behind a hedge, and a curlew winged its way with mournful cry across the mist-wrapped marsh.

He remained stock-still. There was something so weird about the whole incident that for the moment he could not quite grasp things. He stared hard into the rain, hoping to get another view of that fugitive figure.

Nothing moved. A fresher gust of wind than usual bent the gaunt branches of the surrounding trees, and sent a flurry of cold rain into his face. Surely he could not have been deceived; there had been someone out there by the hedge a moment before. He scanned the misty horizon.

Perhaps a couple of miles away across the narrowing mouth of Walm Harbour, Street Grange stood out a vague blur against the leaden sky. In an instant all Carteret's old suspicions came flooding back to him, all the cold logic with which he had convinced himself of the impossible absurdity of Peggy Catchpole and Molly Seymour being one and the same person dissipated before this wild possibility.

There was romance about the idea. The two houses were not so very far apart. But what in Heaven's name was her object? Why that pretence of rough peasant speech?

Carteret was recovering his wits. At any rate, he had no right in this room, and if he had disturbed anybody—Peggy, or Molly, or whoever it might be—she could not be very far off.

It occurred to him then that, save for the shelter of the farm and its few trees and hedges, there was nothing short of a dyke for a mile around to provide cover for a human being.

He went out from the little attic room, shutting the door carefully behind him, and back through the lonely, damp-soaked house into the farmyard. It was easy to satisfy himself that there was nobody in hiding there, and presently he emerged into the road and walked a few yards onward, towards the harbour, to where a gate spanned the track that crossed a wide ditch.

This would have been the gate near which the car stood that night. He hoisted himself on to the rails and looked about.

Was it fancy, he asked himself suddenly, or did something move down there where the rough field merged into the taller grass of the marsh?

The next moment he had leapt from the gate and was walking quickly down the gentle slope. It was hard to tell even now whether that still, yellowy-green patch in the yellowy-green grass was or was not a living creature. But in another moment Michael Carteret's doubts were put at rest. It was someone; he saw a distinct movement as the man or woman, whoever it was, shifted slowly as if cramped.

The figure, he saw, was enveloped in yellow oilskins and sou'wester, and lay prone upon the wet grass, its back towards him. Carteret jumped a narrow drain and walked forward, coughing unnecessarily to announce his approach.

The yellow figure twisted round suddenly and scrambled to its knees.

Carteret checked for a moment wondering what face the next instant would disclose to him. Then, in blank amazement, he heard the familiar, shy voice of Mr. Bernard Pell.

"Dear me, Mr. Carteret! How you startled me!" he said almost apologetically.

Carteret felt somehow that he had been fooled, disappointed. This was not what he had expected.

"Why, Mr. Pell," he answered, "what on earth brings you here?"

Mr. Pell raised a pair of field-glasses, that were suspended from his neck, by way of explanation.

"I—I have been watching the birds," he said in his halting manner. "I—I only discovered this place to-day. It seems ideal for my purpose."

"But how did you get here?"

"Oh, by boat. There is a most convenient little landing-place close at hand. I was so relieved to find it; one has such difficulty in getting ashore on the marshes."

"Yes, I've noticed it," Carteret answered dryly, with memories of his first experience.

"But you?" asked Mr. Pell with unusual interest. "You surely haven't walked here."

"I have, and a wet and lonely walk it was, too."

Carteret laughed. He felt that he was not behaving naturally, and was conscious too that Mr. Pell failed lamentably to provide the answer he sought to the mystery he was determined to solve.

"I haven't met a soul. Have you seen anyone about?" he went on lightly.

"Not a person—not a person. There is, I observe, a house over there, but it would seem to be untenanted. Indeed, I think I have heard Dr. Adam say so."

"It is," Carteret answered, eyeing little Mr. Pell intently. "I've just been over it from floor to—attics."

The little man raised his eyebrows.

"Indeed, Mr. Carteret. How very extraordinary. Then you would know the place well, I suppose?"

"No; I never set eyes upon it before to-day."

"The former inhabitants must have found it very desolate," Mr. Pell surmised.

Carteret pulled out his pipe, wondering what best to do. If it were not Pell he had seen scuttling behind the hedge, he could hardly continue his search with him about. He had not the least desire to have a witness of his meeting with Peggy Catchpole—if it were she.

And if it were Mr. Pell, then the situation took on quite a different aspect; an even more amazing one, for it would seem certain that he could have no occasion for a bed in that mysterious, furnished attic.

The little man stood looking nervously at him.

"I'm afraid I've interrupted your observations," Carteret said suddenly. "I'll get off and leave you in peace."

"Oh, please don't; I should so much appreciate your company, Mr. Carteret."

"But I should only disturb the birds," Carteret answered, a little embarrassed at the apparent sincerity of his companion's words.

"Not at all—not at all. Will you not let me row you over to Pool, for instance? A wonderful place that for duck. I have counted seven varieties there this morning. Through my glasses——"

A new idea came to Carteret. Through those glasses, as Mr. Pell rowed, he could make a very valuable inspection of Dyke Farm. His eye fell upon the almost hidden attic window. He had inadvertently forgotten to close it in his confusion.

"Well, if you don't mind, Mr. Pell," he said.

"It would give me the utmost pleasure," Mr. Pell responded in his courteous way.

Quite casually Michael Carteret tried Mr. Pell's binoculars as the little man pulled his tubby dinghy across a now sluggish stream.

"They seem very powerful," he commented, gazing at the slowly receding marshes.

"One needs them powerful," Mr. Pell remarked modestly.

In an aimless way Carteret raised the glasses until they showed distinctly the eaves of the farmhouse.

Mr. Pell noticed that his passenger stiffened suddenly.

"I suppose so," Carteret answered. But he spoke at random, for Mr. Pell's powerful glasses had showed him the attic window at Dyke Farm fast closed.

### III.

Mr. Pell thawed as the morning went on. He disclosed an entirely unsuspected vein of pawky humour and a tendency for mild—but harmless—gossip.

He professed a deep admiration for Sophie Vizard. "Such a keen intelligence, Mr. Carteret," he said as they munched their midday sandwiches, seated upon his outspread oily on a patch of shingle on the fringe of Pool Island. "It amused her to make fun of my hobby sometimes; but I did not mind. She meant no harm by it."

"Of course not," Carteret agreed. "A very charming woman, Lady Sophie. I'm sorry she's gone."

"Some trouble with Sir Robert Sark, I understand," Mr. Pell commented diffidently. "I found him a little overbearing myself."

Carteret was surprised, before long, to find how easy it was to talk to this badger-haired little man. He was no fool. He had travelled widely and seemed to have lived much of his life in the East. Michael put him down as a retired Civil Servant of the old school, and by the time they had reached Salthithe Quay, after a fatiguing pull against the first of the ebb tide, the two were exchanging reminiscences with the utmost freedom.

Carteret went to his rooms to change before tea, a meal, for once, for which he was more than ready.

Life had become interesting again. To-morrow he was going back to Dyke Farm, and this time its mysterious occupant should not elude him. It was a queer business, but a fascinating one. Peggy and Molly—could they be the same? If so, they—she—he laughed at the confusion of his thoughts—she must be an extraordinarily interesting character. More than ever he wanted to meet this phantom of the marsh.

He wandered downstairs at the sound of the gong to meet Rafe Adam in the hall.

"Ah, Mr. Carteret," the doctor said in his bluff way, "the very man I wanted to see. We were talking of the Seymours last night; the Major and his daughter have looked in for tea to-day; I want you to meet them."

Carteret felt his heart beat suddenly swifter. This was a strange coincidence, but it rather shook his latest accepted theory.

"I should be delighted," he answered, thinking hard.

"Then come along and let me introduce you."

They found Major Seymour and his daughter in the big lounge, seated a little distance from the other occupants, who eyed them with curious interest. Rafe Adam made the introduction, then drifted off to talk to his patients.

The Major was a wiry, sallow complexioned man, with remarkably clear blue eyes. He looked in the early sixties and as though he had spent most of his days in the open air.

Trained to make a swift judgment of men, Carteret instantly placed this man as individual. He had the eyes of a fanatic; the sort of expression that haunts the face of the rebel—the egoist who, rightly or wrongly, will go his own way despite law and convention.

His voice was low and well modulated and his manner easy.

"My daughter and I have been in Ipswich all day, shopping," he said, "and Dr. Adam is often good enough to give us a cup of tea on such occasions. We've nine miles farther to go—to the end of the world"—he laughed a little bitterly—"before we reach our own home."

Molly Seymour broke in with perfect confidence.

"Mr. Carteret and I have almost met before, you know, father."

"In Paris," Carteret interposed with a smile. "Miss Seymour was with Lady Sophie when by chance we met at the same hotel."

Molly Seymour's blue eyes twinkled.

"I wasn't sure that I should have admitted that," she laughed. "I thought perhaps, like Sophie, you were playing truant."

"No. Nothing secret about it," he replied. "Nothing nearly so romantic."

"Poor Sophie," Molly said with a sigh. "I feel so guilty. She's been such a dear to me. It was I who really made up the plot, you know. She told me she'd told you. I wrote her and begged her to steal a day off. And now she's had a row with that dreadful Sark man, and perhaps it will be awfully bad for her."

"I hope not," Carteret said. "But I shall miss her charming company a lot here."

He was watching her keenly as he spoke. Molly Seymour was certainly a beautiful girl. She could hardly be more than twenty-five, and her skin had that wonderful inimitable bloom that only sheer health can give. Her blue eyes, so like her father's, were deep and thoughtful. She exuded confidence, and she, too, would be something of a rebel. But Carteret was concentrating his interest upon her voice.

"Now, tell me what you do with yourself here? It must be appallingly dull," she said with a smile, as she wriggled out of her heavy tweed coat.

"Oh—I'm taking my cure," he answered whimsically. "I've had one afternoon's shooting." His eyes lifted innocently to meet a gaze of real interest. "And——"

"Major!"

Dr. Adam's voice came across the room, and Carteret hesitated.

"Major, who owns Dyke Farm now; do you? Mr. Pell is just asking me; I think he wants to take it."

Mr. Pell and the others tittered politely as Major Seymour rose to go to Mr. Pell's table.

"Mr. Pell would get a rest cure at Dyke right enough," Molly put in with a chuckle of amusement. "You ought to see the place if you want to know what real loneliness is, Mr. Carteret. Oh, the dreariness of it!"

She laughed again, and there was that same queer husky note in the sound that, despite all reason, told Michael Carteret that this must be the woman who came to him out of the darkness that night on the mud flats.

He glanced round quickly. Rafe Adam and the Major were in the centre of a laughing group which had taken up the doctor's joke about Mr. Pell and the letting of Dyke Farm.

Carteret pushed his chair forward a few inches and looked up, challengingly, into Molly Seymour's smiling face.

"I called at Dyke Farm this morning, Miss Seymour," he said quietly. "I wanted to meet again a Miss Peggy Catchpole. Have you ever heard of her?"

Molly Seymour's face wrinkled into a slow and fascinating smile.

"Peggy Catchpole? Oh, Mr. Carteret, how simply lovely! You didn't really think there was such a person—to-day, I mean."

"Indeed I did," he answered, more than puzzled by her frank amusement. "I have very good reason to know it. She did me an uncommonly good turn——"

"But Peggy's been dead for ages. She's one of our local heroines in Suffolk. Surely you've read 'Margaret Catchpole'; it's a sort of Bible to us down here."

Carteret felt unreasonably annoyed; as if he had made a fool of himself and did not quite know how.

"I'm afraid," he said stiffly, "that I never heard of the book. What's it about?"

Molly gave a little, soft, husky laugh.

"Why, about Peggy," she replied teasingly.

"But what about her?"

"All about her. Mr. Carteret, your education has been shockingly neglected. You must read the book at once. I'll even give you a copy."

"Will you?" he said, smiling involuntarily at her ingenuous manner. "I'll promise to read it."

She leant forward to pour out another cup of tea, and he could see that she was still bubbling with amusement.

"But who is this mysterious young woman?" he went on in an effort to appear at ease.

"Oh, she was a daring girl," Molly said cheerily. "She did all sorts of naughty things—stole horses, went to prison, broke out, and was deported to Australia, where she died a respected and virtuous matron. She was a farm-girl—but I'm not going to tell you; you'll have to read for yourself."

Michael Carteret felt more annoyed than ever.

"But why make a heroine of such a character?" he asked.

Molly's voice sank to a rich, soft note.

"Because, you see, she was so romantic. She did all this for the sake of her true love. Doesn't that sound sweet? Only her true love was a thoroughly bad boy who didn't deserve any of the things she did for him. And she knew it, poor Margaret! You have to like her; you will when you read the book."

"I think I like her already," he said whimsically.

She looked up suddenly.

"But you haven't told me yet who *you* meant by Peggy Catchpole?" she questioned.

"I'll tell you when I've read the story," he said evasively.

Rafe Adam and the Major, returning at the moment, put an end to the conversation, though just for a second Carteret thought Molly Seymour was going to rag him.

"Daddy," she said, as the Major sat down, "Mr. Carteret hasn't read 'Margaret Catchpole.' Isn't that scandalous?"

"I always thought that girl was a fool," her father commented.

Dr. Adam broke in.

"What! Not read old Cobbold's Suffolk classic? I'll lend it to you."

"Oh, thanks very much," Carteret answered, raising his eyes with a half-smile towards Molly. "But Miss Seymour has kindly offered to give me one. I shall wait for that."

"Then you'd better come and fetch it and have tea one afternoon," she answered gaily.

"I will, with great pleasure," he said. "You've made me extraordinarily curious about this unconventional young woman."

## IV.

When the Seymours had gone, Carteret strolled out for a solitary walk before night settled down.

The rain had ceased, for the wind had shifted and now blew keen from the north-east. In place of the grey, weeping skies of the day, the heavens now showed clear, with twinkling stars beginning to glimmer faintly as the light faded.

He walked down to the edge of the harbour and looked, wondering, across the lonely waste to where the lights of Street blinked mysteriously.

Now, how did he stand? he asked himself. The mystery girl had fooled him, fooled him with a name that was a byword to the countryside. It was almost as though a stranger, met by the wayside, had asked to be remembered as Dick Turpin or Robin Hood.

It showed a sense of humour, anyhow, and something more than a peasant intelligence. It was just the sort of impish thing that girl Molly Seymour would do. Yes, amazing though it seemed, she was the girl, Carteret was sure. Yet what in Heaven's name was she doing in Paris with Lady Sophie? And why that uncompromising misstatement of Sophie's that the girl had been in France for some time?

His mind wandered to the events of that day—the furnished room in desolate Dyke, the mysterious unknown who had ultimately returned to close the attic window. Where had he—or she—been hiding?

It could not have been Molly, after all, for she had been in Ipswich with her father. It certainly could not have been Mr. Pell.

Carteret worried the problem as he would some new and complicated brief, but with a different result. No legal problem had ever yet faced him out of which he could not see some way. But this one, with its madnesses, its impossibilities that proved the only probable solution, baffled him.

Yet it excited him. There was the joy of the chase about probing this mystery of Dyke Farm, for there, he felt, the identity of Peggy Catchpole would be proved.

Those roguish blue eyes of Molly Seymour's grew clear in his memory. They seemed to laugh at him as they challenged him. There had been nothing suspicious in her behaviour, no suggestion of guilt or self-consciousness, yet she must have known what he was driving at.

"Confound the girl!" Michael murmured to a silent world. "I'm hanged if she shall have the last laugh!"

He walked slowly back to The Warren, almost beginning to doubt the incidents of that night on the mud, so preposterous now did the whole affair seem.

And the morning found him still uncertain. He wanted to be doing something. Molly Seymour had fixed no day for him to call at Street Grange, and he was debating whether it would be too soon to go that very afternoon.

He would have to be back in good time, for there was to be bridge and an informal dance at The Warren that night, and Rafe Adam had made a curiously personal appeal to him, after breakfast, to turn up 'and help me play the host,' as he had put it.

Carteret had shied at first, explaining that parties weren't in his line, but the doctor had explained:

"As a matter of fact, these little shows of ours are a Godsend to the village. Old Joliffe and his daughters come—he's the parson, you know—and the Castles from Holm, and practically all our civilized neighbours for miles round turn up. It will be quite good fun."

"Are the Seymours coming over?" Michael asked casually.

Adam shook his head.

"It was partly to explain that they couldn't that they looked in yesterday. The Major has asked some stodgy neighbour of his to dine and play chess; Seymour's only vice is chess."

"But Miss Seymour?"

"No, she has to stay and look after the domestic side. They only run to one servant at the Grange these days."

So Michael reluctantly consented.

But a little later on, as he was idling down by the quay, Mr. Pell appeared with oilskins and binoculars. Catching sight of Carteret, he came forward with his shy smile.

"It's such a lovely morning I was going out for a little sail," he said. "I suppose you wouldn't care to come, would you?"

Carteret was bored with things, and he answered on the spur of the moment:

"If you're going down the harbour and would land me at Street, I'd be obliged. I want to have a look at that village; it seems so picturesque from across the water."

"Of course I will, with pleasure," said little Mr. Pell.

And again they got on famously together, the diffident little man chatting away briskly on all sorts of topics.

Carteret, seated on the middle thwart of the dinghy, was surprised to find how skilful a sailor his queer companion was. There was a strongish head-wind, but Mr. Pell managed the boat like a master.

"As a boy I always wanted to follow the sea," he said, with a deprecatory laugh, when Carteret complimented him upon his sailing. "Perhaps it's as well I did not. One gets so much more pleasure out of work as play, don't you think so, Mr. Carteret?"

"I suppose so," Michael answered, amused at the prim remark.

Mr. Pell landed him at Street Quay, a smaller edition of the wharf at Salthithe, and Michael firmly refused the kindly little man's offer to return for him later.

"No, I'll walk back, or hire a local conveyance if I'm lazy," he said, thanking him.

He stood on the wharf and watched Mr. Pell's strange, oilskin-clad figure as the dinghy made off towards the opposite shore. To-day, in the brilliant sunshine and keen, clean air, Dyke Farm seemed almost within hailing distance. Carteret wondered if anyone were up in that little attic room now.

Then he turned and wandered through the quiet village street in the direction of Street Grange.

Once clear of the village, the road was bleak as the road to Dyke. On one side, level marshes extended away into the distance towards the coast; on the other, but a few yards separated the road from the muddy foreshore of the harbour. Indeed, at high tides the water must often be over the road, as straggling wisps of dried seaweed plainly told.

Long before Carteret reached the solitary house his advent was heralded by the loud barking of dogs, and as he reached a wooden gate, sorely in need of repainting, which gave access to a neglected, weed-grown drive, an ugly-looking mongrel, half collie, half retriever, burst through the thick shrubs and planted itself in his way, growling in that ominous manner that foretells danger.

Carteret got his stick ready and tried to placate the beast, but the dog would have none of his blandishments and showed its teeth viciously as it persisted in a low growl.

Carteret hated to turn back at this last moment, but it seemed it must be that or a fight with the cur, and that would hardly be an auspicious way of paying his first call.

But at that moment a rough-looking fellow appeared down the path and whistled the dog off.

He was a burly, suspicious-eyed man suggestive both of fisherman and labourer. Carteret called out cheerfully:

"I was wondering if Miss Seymour or the Major were at home. But your dog doesn't seem to like the look of me."

The fellow replied civilly enough that the Major was there, and explained vaguely that Sam, the dog, had broken out.

"'E ain't used to strangers, sir," he said, "and we don't see many of they here."

"No, I suppose not," Carteret agreed.

They went up the drive and came shortly to a mellow, red-brick, old house. It had been a noble mansion in its time, but now it betrayed every evidence of neglect. The lawn was rough, and the flower-beds ragged and unkempt. Blinds were drawn in most of the rooms, and the white paint of both door and window frames was blistered and stained by weather.

The one sign of modernity about the place was the long wireless aerial that extended between two varnished masts.

Carteret smiled, as he rang the bell, to think of the inhabitants of this lonely spot listening-in to the Savoy Band on winter nights when wild gales swept the desolate marshes and the crash of breakers, on the shingle of the sea-beach not far away, must mingle with the jazz tunes.

An elderly country woman ushered him into a cosily shabby living-room and announced that she would 'tell the master.'

She departed, leaving the door open, and Carteret's gaze wandered about the room and out into the dingy hall. The place was so very silent; it must be a dreary home, he thought, for a girl as high-spirited and intelligent as Molly Seymour.

A creak from the stairs told of someone approaching. His eyes were fixed on the door expectantly. Would it be Molly coming, after all? They had not actually said that she was out.

And then, subconsciously at first, but the next moment, with intense astonishment, his eyes wandered to a big box that stood in the shadow across the hall.

Involuntarily he jumped to his feet and tiptoed across the room. That box was most familiar; there was no doubt about it now, he could discern the broad black and white painted stripe and the well-worn initials 'S. V.'

It was Sophie Vizard's trunk, which only a couple of days before he had seen Dr. Adam's chauffeur hoist on top of the car that was to take Sophie to London.

There was hardly time then even to realize his discovery, for a heavy tread on the stairs told of the immediate approach of—without doubt—the Major.

Carteret took a few swift paces across to the window, and, feeling absolutely dumbfounded, stood gazing at the neglected garden when Major Seymour entered the room.

"It's very good of you to come to see us so soon," Seymour said courteously as he advanced with outstretched hand.

Michael swung round as if surprised.

"I'm afraid I've chosen an awkward time to call, sir," he said, struggling hard to affect an ease he did not feel. "As a matter of fact, Mr. Pell—you will remember him yesterday—was sailing down this way, and I got him to land me at the village."

"Yes, yes. Of course. The queer little chap who talks birds."

It struck Michael that the Major was no more at ease than himself, and he went on quickly:

"So I thought I'd take my chance and walk up here to see if Miss Seymour were at home, and claim her promise to lend me that book we were talking about."

The Major gave a queer smile.

"Oh, 'Margaret Catchpole'—that dull thing! You'll find it heavy reading, Carteret. But I'm sorry to say my daughter's out. She's gone over to—er—to a neighbour's for lunch."

The conversation halted perceptibly. The Major shuffled from one foot to another, and Carteret found himself thinking hard what to say next.

"Then I—I must come over some other time, if I may," he said at last, thoroughly aware of the futility of the remark.

Seymour seemed to pull himself together.

"Of course, of course, any time. Only too delighted," he responded genially. "We see so few people in this infernal place that a new acquaintance like yourself, Carteret, is uncommonly welcome. Do you play chess by any chance?"

Michael recalled swiftly Rafe Adam's comment on the Major's 'only vice,' and lied glibly.

"No, I hardly know the moves," he replied with a shameless smile.

"That's a pity," Seymour commented. "It's a man's whole salvation in a place like this. But you'll have a drink of some kind? A glass of madeira now, or a little cognac?"

Brandy seemed an odd drink before lunch, and Michael chose madeira; but he wondered, as the Major, with a few words of apology for the lack of servants, went off to get the wine, whether perhaps brandy had not something to do with the Seymour's fallen estate. Yet the man did not look like a drunkard.

He was away for some minutes, and when he returned it was with a newly opened bottle, the ancient appearance of which did not belie the wonderful bouquet that came from the golden liquid as he filled a couple of glasses.

"I've very little decent wine left now," he said as he sipped his drink appreciatively. "There was a time—but damn it all! what can a man do in these days of Bolshevik plunder! Before that cursed war a country gentleman could live. But now they tax you to death. Each new Government's just as bad. You were in the war, I suppose; so was I. I went back as a 'dug-out,' and did what I could. And what for? To return to my own home a ruined man."

Carteret was taken aback by the bitterness of this outburst. It was so entirely unexpected, so unnecessary even.

He answered weakly:

"I'm afraid, sir, there are too many people like yourself who are hard hit in these days."

Seymour appeared hardly to hear him. He was gazing, frowning down at his wine. Michael noted the rebellion in the blue eyes more than ever; the Major's expression was savage and implacable.

"Ah, well," he said after a moment, "I suppose we've got to put up with it; but it does make me sick to see the country teeming with illiterates, with so much money they don't know what to do with it. I had some fellow here last summer, with a Jew nose and a German name, asking if I'd like to sell the Grange to him, if you please. The impudent beast came up here in a huge car and said he liked the look of the place, and money was no object. I set the dogs on to him."

"Then I'm almost sorry for the profiteer," Carteret laughed. "You have one dog here that scared me."

The Major smiled naturally again, and his bitter humour left him for the moment. They talked on for some minutes of commonplaces, but all the while there was an underlying strain of manner in both of them, and presently Michael got up to go.

The Major said:

"I feel horribly inhospitable not to ask you to lunch, but, as a matter of fact, when Molly's away I don't lunch. We run a sort of pauper establishment here." Again the bitter note crept into his voice.

Michael brushed aside the apologies easily.

"My dear Major," he answered, "it's kind of you, but I could not stay, anyhow. As you know, I'm taking a cure with Adam, and part of that cure is superhuman exercise in the fresh air. I'm planning to walk back to Salthithe, and I couldn't do that after a good lunch. I doubt if I can do it after two glasses of your wonderful madeira."

Major Seymour was a man of the world. He did not pursue the subject save to say:

"Then come again soon, when you haven't to walk back, and the Grange shall redeem its reputation."

The Major walked with him as far as the drive gate, and Carteret noted, as he went through the hall, that an old raincoat had been flung negligently over the trunk that bore Sophie Vizard's initials.

## V.

The party at The Warren that night was dreary in the extreme. At least, Michael Carteret found it so.

The Reverend Augustine Joliffe and his three ingenuous daughters were having a boisterous time; the girls were unashamedly anxious to dance with that famous Mr. Carteret. The other neighbours were equally agreeable and equally happy. There were twelve or fourteen of them altogether, typical country gentlefolk with simple tastes and pleasing manners.

But Michael was in no mood for innocent flirtation. He was irritable; the determined gaiety of his fellow-guests fretted him. He revoked at bridge and stumbled in his dancing, for his mind was far away from The Warren's innocuous merriment.

It was asking that eternal question—Why?

Was Sophie at the Grange. If so, why?

Why had the landlord of the Mariner's Compass at Street, where he had eaten a simple lunch of bread-and-cheese, taken such a particular interest in him and his visit to the Seymours? It seemed queer that he should comment to a stranger upon the Major's retired life and his love of chess, and volunteer the information that he and the squire—for such Seymour still was—sometimes indulged in a game together.

The Major, Carteret thought, must be a little cracked. He felt about him as the man at the general shop in Street evidently felt about Michael when he hired a bicycle to ride the nine bleak miles back to Salthithe.

"One of Dr. Adam's gentlemen? Oh, then that'll be all right, sir," the man had said with a placatory smile when Michael had given his address as an earnest of good faith. He clearly thought him an object for pity.

Carteret's mind went to that bicycle stored away in a shed at the back of the shrubbery. Then, on the impulse of the moment, he walked across to Dr. Adam.

"Look here, doctor," he said with a rueful smile, "you'll be keeping this up pretty late, I suppose. You've got to let me off duty for a bit. I'm going to take some more fresh-air cure."

Adam laughed cheerfully.

"You've been noble, Mr. Carteret," he said. "I don't suppose we shall break up much before one o'clock, so try to look in again, there's a good fellow."

"I'll try not to fail you," Michael answered with relief, then, unobserved, he disappeared from the room.

A few minutes later, his legs tucked into a pair of gum-boots, an old tweed jacket and sweater replacing his white waistcoat and tailed coat, Michael mounted the hired bicycle and set out, with no very certain object, through the still night.

He rode on past the village for a mile to where the bridge led over the Walm, and, crossing this, found himself on the lonely elevation of Holm Common. Presently his road joined that which led to the ferry, and made a saving of some three miles to one bound for Salthithe. He dismounted for a moment. Away to the right the track sloped gently downhill to the saltings and eventually to Dyke Farm. That desolate house fascinated him. On a bicycle he could be there in twenty minutes. He looked across the harbour, over which a light mist hung mysteriously. There was not a light to be seen anywhere save that of his lamp. And that, as he hesitated, flickered and went out.

"I'll go," he said with sudden determination, and the next moment he had mounted and was coasting carefully down towards the misty marsh.

But riding that tortuous road in the uncertain hazy darkness was no easy task, although he could see better, he realized, without the glare of a headlamp than with one.

Once, at a sharp turn, he nearly took a header into a ditch, and a few minutes later the wail of a curlew, disturbed by the crunch of his tyres on the loose road, startled him so that he lurched dangerously.

That eerie wail was taken up by another bird in the distance; then silence fell again.

The mist was patchy, and in places the road was quite clear; at others he had to dismount and lead his bicycle through a woolly blackness.

It was as he groped his way through one of the densest of these patches that he stopped suddenly with every nerve taut and his ears straining anxiously to listen. Somebody was speaking in a low voice within a few yards of him.

"That you, Steven?" came the question soft and distinct.

Instinctively Michael stood motionless, thrilled and uneasy. He knew that voice well enough; it was the mystery girl speaking.

Peggy or Molly, she was there within a pace or two of him, yet some instinct kept him tongue-tied and immobile. There was something bigger about this mysterious problem than ever he had dreamed, he knew then.

There was a short, tense silence in which Carteret could feel his heart beating violently. Then a faint, swift patter of footsteps receding, and he knew that the girl had gone, running back towards Dyke.

Scarcely knowing what he did, he flung his bicycle on to the roadside and followed on foot stealthily. A couple of hundred paces brought him, with disconcerting abruptness, into clear air once more. He knew where he was now, that last impenetrable bank of fog marked a dip in the road where a tiny stream meandered sluggishly to a little inlet from the harbour. He was within a few minutes of the farm itself, and could see its dark form clearly ahead.

He listened. Through the still night a sound came to him, indefinite but suggestive of subdued conversation and movement. Intuitively he leapt the bordering ditch and took to the murky fields, crouching low and moving about almost on all fours towards the distant murmur. Then a broad dyke barred his way, and cautiously he lowered himself into it.

It was wet and reedy, but his gum-boots enabled him to move along its soggy bottom with comparative comfort. And it led him on towards the path which went from Dyke Farm to the landing-place by the shore.

He wormed his way along until the sound of voices, almost at his ear, brought him to a startled halt.

It was Molly Seymour talking now, beyond doubt.

"Is that the lot, Hunter?" she asked anxiously.

"The last bale, miss."

"Then get up with it quickly; there are strangers about."

"What, spies?" The question came in an ugly, threatening tone.

"I don't know, but Steven has signalled twice. Hurry, man, hurry; I'll go down and tell Davis to shove off quickly, the sooner he's out of the harbour the better."

Still as a log, Carteret heard the two proceeding on their ways. Then he raised his head and peered excitedly through a screen of whispering reeds. The mystery was solved now beyond all manner of doubt.

Smuggling was the answer, and Molly Seymour was in the thick of it.

# CHAPTER III

## I.

STREET GRANGE seemed to be asleep in a dense mantle of sea mist. No light showed from any window, and a great silence pervaded the place, a silence broken only by the distant beat of breakers upon the shingle of the sea-beach a mile away.

But in an upper room, closely curtained, Major Seymour and Lady Sophie Vizard sat. For half an hour neither of them had spoken a word. Sophie's face was drawn with anxiety; she looked ten years older than the woman who had talked so gaily to Michael Carteret. A book lay open in her lap, but minutes went by when her twitching fingers never turned a page.

On the other side of the room the Major sat, alert, before a wireless set, ear-phones on his head, and a little code-book on the table by his side. A big fire of pine logs crackled in the grate.

Suddenly he raised his hand, and Sophie dropped her novel as he motioned her to take her own pair of phones.

She moved across to the table.

"That's not the boat," the Major said sharply after a few moments; "that's Dyke calling."

Sophie nodded.

"Did you get that?" he said, a second later.

"'King's knight,'" she answered in a scared way. "What's that? What's Dyke sending that for?"

He fumbled feverishly with the code-book.

"Good Gad!" he answered with sharp annoyance.

" 'King's knight—strangers reported in the neighbourhood.' Sophie, someone's been blabbing."

"But who could?" she asked.

"Heaven knows; I don't. Be quiet. They'll be sending again in a minute."

He spoke peremptorily, and she sat as if afraid to move, her queer eyes roaming nervously about the cosy room.

Seymour was gazing straight ahead, a strained expression on his sallow face.

They remained in silence as the minutes dragged by, then both started together.

"Dyke again," Sophie murmured.

"Curse that Morse," he said impatiently. "Can you get it, Sophie."

She shook her head. Then:

"Yes. 'Queen's pawn.' I heard."

Again he turned to his code-book, and an ugly look came into the blue eyes.

"She's going to abandon," he said savagely.

Sophie flung off her ear-phones.

"Who's responsible for this?" she said viciously. "It's a pretty poor organization that breaks down the second time you try it."

"Don't squeal before you're hurt," he answered sharply. "Molly knows what she's doing; we may have to get busy ourselves in a minute."

Sophie's mouth narrowed.

"You'll have to stand the racket alone, that's all," she said.

He ignored the remark, concentrating his whole attention upon the instrument.

Presently she picked up her phones again, and her now livid face took upon it the same intent expression as her companion's.

"Dyke again," she muttered after a long wait.

"'Check. Queen's rook. King's rook. Check,'" Seymour repeated.

Simultaneously they disengaged themselves from their head-phones, and gazed blankly at one another across the table.

"That's serious," Seymour said in an anxious voice. "She's abandoned and is coming back."

Sophie rose and paced slowly about the room, frowning.

"Well, that's going to cost you a thousand and me ten," she said bitterly.

"My dear Sophie," he replied blandly, "it may cost us a good deal more than that. But perhaps it would be wise to wait for Molly and hear what she has to say. At least she can get back. Dyke didn't send 'Mate,' you'll remember."

The Major was clearly disgusted with Sophie Vizard's defeatist attitude. His was a fighting nature that strengthened with rebuff. He was worried, more worried than Sophie could realize; his instinct was to prepare the next line of defence. His bright blue eyes showed a stubborn light.

"Well, what do we do now?" she asked at last.

"You'd better make Molly some hot cocoa," he said briefly. "I'll listen in case they should send 'Mate.'"

He picked up the phones again, ignoring Sophie, who reluctantly began to busy herself about the hearth.

The minutes passed like hours. The Major remained almost motionless, intent upon his task. Sophie drifted aimlessly about, worried and impatient.

It came as an enormous relief to both of them to hear at last a peculiar whistle from the silence without the house. Sophie started for the door. The Major jumped to his feet.

"Don't worry," he said, and there was a note of bravado in the tone; "she can get in. We'll know the worst now."

And a minute later the door opened and Molly entered.

She was dressed in the rough costume of the fisher-folk. As she threw off the black oilskins she disclosed a blue knitted jersey above a short serge skirt that barely covered her knees. Her legs were encased in thigh-high gum-boots.

She snatched a knitted stocking cap from her head and flung it across the room, running her fingers wearily through her rebellious chestnut hair, cut short to her neck yet falling in graceful waves over her forehead.

"Something's gone wrong," she said with a fearless laugh.

Sophie started forward. Her voice was hard.

"But the stuff. Is that safe?" she asked instantly.

"Oh, that's all right, Sophie. But we haven't got it away. I daren't. There was someone about. It had better stay at Dyke till we know a little more."

"What happened, Molly?" her father put in quietly. "Here, my dear, you'll be glad of this." He handed her the steaming bowl of cocoa which Sophie had prepared and forgotten. "Are the men back?"

"I left Steven over there," Molly answered. "He was the safest. The rest came back with me. I think it's all right, but the fog worried us."

"But who was it that disturbed the business?"

The Major was leaning forward, his lean face alive with interest.

Molly gave her little, husky laugh.

"My friend, Mr. Carteret, of all people, to judge from Steven's description. He says he recognized him as the man who called here this morning. He was bicycling."

"But what happened to him?" Sophie asked sharply. "Why did Steven let him by?"

Molly took a deep and joyous gulp at her cocoa.

"Ah! That's the catch, Sophie," she answered cheerily. "We don't know what happened to him, and I wasn't taking any chances. Steven found the bicycle by the roadside just by the stream, and wisely left it there. But where Mr. Carteret was we don't know. I hope, poor dear, he isn't in a dyke. He's quite a nice thing."

For the first time the Major showed annoyance.

"Look here, Molly, this is no joke," he said. "Carteret's a big bug; his father's a Judge, and he himself has got a pretty big name at the Bar. If anything's happened to him there'll be the devil to pay."

"My dear old daddy," Molly replied with a superior smile; "that's what I left Steven for. He's watching that bicycle like a hawk, and if Mr. Carteret hasn't found it yet, Steven will find him. There's not an inch of the Holm Saltings Steven doesn't know."

"And what then?" Sophie demanded angrily.

"Well, Steven will either let him go in peace, or save his life and get a whacking great reward. Call Dyke, daddy, and see if there's any news."

Obediently the Major went to the wireless.

"Queen's rook," he spoke distinctly into the microphone. Then, after a brief wait, he repeated the call casually.

The two women watched the Major's face keenly. They saw he was being answered. The strained eyes hardened at the corners as Seymour said quietly: "Your move."

He turned suddenly to Molly.

"What's 'Gambit three'?" he asked.

Molly searched the code-book deftly.

"All clear, but not satisfied," she replied with a frown.

"Taken," said Seymour, as he flung off the phones. Then: "Molly, this is awkward. That must mean the man's safe, but Steven thinks he knows something."

Molly shrugged her shoulders.

"Sophie, this is where you come in," she said coolly. "Mr. Carteret can't possibly suspect you; you'd better find out what he does suspect, somehow."

"I'm not so sure," Sophie answered uncertainly. "What about that trunk of mine in the hall when he came to-day, Major?"

"My dear Sophie, he couldn't possibly have noticed it," Seymour answered with conviction. "Molly's right, you'd better deal with him at once."

Sophie Vizard frowned.

"The man's becoming a nuisance," she said impatiently. "I wish to heaven Sir Robert had never sent him down here. It's almost a pity you got him off the mud that night, Molly. It was much too romantic; of course, the man's hopelessly in love with you."

There was the suspicion of a sneer in her voice although she finished with a laugh.

Molly drew up to the fire and demanded a cigarette.

"I'm sorry about his hopeless love," she answered, unperturbed, "but as for the mud—you've never been there, Sophie, have you? It would do you good to spend an hour or two on Sealy Flat with a north-easter blowing gently—you know, like liquid ice. Switch on to the loud speaker, daddy, in case he wants to call again."

"Oh, I wasn't serious," Sophie said, nettled a little at Molly's cool retort.

"You would be—on the mud," Molly answered as a final thrust. Then lazily raising herself she held out one leg to her father and demanded: "Pull my boots off for me, please, will you? I've been in them for five hours."

The Major complied willingly. He was as much his daughter's slave as she was his. And when she stretched her thickly stockinged feet to the fire, she said with the same cheerful calmness:

"Well, the point is, what are we going to do about Mr. Carteret? If it wasn't so late, I'd change and drive over to The Warren dance and tackle him myself. There's nothing so bemusing for these logical, legal brains as impossibilities. He firmly believed I was at Ipswich yesterday. I don't think we've much to be afraid of in my Mr. Carteret, even if he knows."

"Molly, you're too reckless," the Major broke in. "It isn't what the man would want to do, it's what he'd have to do if he knew. You must see that a well-known barrister and the son of a High Court Judge daren't get mixed up in a business like ours."

"We've got to get him away from this place before he does any more harm," Sophie said with decision. "Molly's intrigued him too much."

"Why not get him mixed up, as daddy calls it, and then he daren't tell." Molly laughed.

"For Heaven's sake, don't try any silly joke like that," Sophie put in quickly. "This isn't a game we're playing."

"Isn't it?" Molly asked innocently. "I find it one of the most exciting games I've ever played in my life."

Lady Sophie and the Major exchanged anxious glances.

"Oh, it's only Molly's way," her father said after a moment. "She's tired. She's had all the hard work to-night."

"True, O father," Molly responded with complete unconcern. "I'm off to bed. You and Sophie can fix the next move—you're the gilded staff. I've got the stuff tucked safely away at Dyke, now you two think out a way of getting rid of it—and of dear Mr. Carteret. Good-night."

There was a cheerful, almost impudent, smile upon her wind-burned face as she walked quietly from the room, but there were signs, in the unnatural lines around the deep, thoughtful eyes, of immense fatigue. Molly had endured an enormous strain, mental and bodily, in the past hours. And because she was too plucky to admit it, she took refuge in flight.

Sophie and the Major sat long over their discussion. Molly had been in a heavy, dreamless sleep for an hour and more before they broke up their session.

"Yes, you're right; it's the best thing to do," Sophie said finally, rising wearily. "My car's at Ipswich; if you can get me there by ten I can be in town before lunch."

"I'll drive you myself," he answered.

"It would be better. Then you leave Mr. Carteret to me. There's no time to waste, and you'll have plenty to do at this end."

## II.

Salthithe's ancient church clock was striking midnight when Michael Carteret reappeared at The Warren. The party had flagged sadly, but his return, in the highest of spirits, gave new life to the function.

His shirt was a little crumpled, but he had changed from his mud-stained trousers, and there was nothing about him to suggest that only an hour previously he had been crouching up to his knees in slimy water watching a contraband cargo being run.

The Joliffe girls were delighted.

"Where have you been all this time?" Enid asked gushingly. "We thought you were bored with us poor country mice and had gone for good."

Carteret smiled at her quizzically.

"You seem to forget that I'm a patient and have to take my medicine. I've been for a walk in the fog."

"Is it foggy? What a bore!"

"What's that, Carteret, foggy out, you say?" Rafe Adam asked at his elbow.

"Only in patches, doctor. But you've spoilt my story. I was going to invent a wonderful adventure for Miss Enid."

Enid Joliffe laughed as she feigned disapproval.

"How mean of you, Mr. Carteret," she said. "I'll never believe anything you say, now."

"Oh, please!" he protested. "I didn't tell the story, you know. I might have relented."

She giggled contentedly, and he led her off to dance.

He delayed the final break-up of the party a full half-hour by infecting Mr. Pell, who had been playing bridge, with his merry mood.

Mr. Pell, it appeared, dabbled in sleight of hand, and when challenged by Michael, admitted to 'just a slight knowledge' of the three-card trick. Egged on by Carteret, Mr. Pell soon had the Rector enthralled in an effort to 'find the lady,' while before the whole company he informed Miss Collin, in perfectly serious tones, that Mr. Pell was really a cardsharper by profession.

"By Jove, Carteret, you saved the situation," the doctor said appreciatively when the guests had gone and Mr. Pell and Michael were having a night-cap in Adam's study.

"But it was a little scandalous to say what you did to Miss Collin," Pell put in primly. "She will believe every word, you know."

They all laughed, and Rafe Adam asked casually:

"Where did you get to to-night? Wherever it was it seems to have done you good."

"As a matter of fact, I took that bicycle I hired, and rode out through the village towards Holm. It was pretty thick in bits, but it looked dense on the Marsh."

Mr. Pell was interested.

"Lucky you didn't take that road," he said.

"Very," Michael agreed, rising. "If I had, I should probably have been there yet."

Carteret stayed in bed the next morning, announcing that he thought he had a cold coming on. For he wanted an hour or two, undisturbed, to remove the signs of his midnight adventures from his clothes, and he wanted, too, to think things out more clearly.

His discovery was a fantastic one. He had heard that smuggling was reviving in England since the cutting down of the coast guard and the imposition of post-war duties. But that, he imagined, was a small sort of hole-and-corner business. What he had witnessed was smuggling on the old-fashioned, grand scale.

And Molly was in it, too, and so, doubtless, was her father. He was right when he had judged the Seymours' blue eyes to be those of no normal law-abiding folk. But what of Sophie Vizard? What part did she play in this affair?

It was distinctly thrilling and most romantic; but it was a desperate game. That sort of business could only lead to violence and disaster in the end.

There was too much of the natural smuggler in

Michael, as in every man, to make him condemn the smuggling as a crime. Governments somehow always seem fair game, and evading taxes he could not place in the same category as other forms of theft.

But he was worried, extremely worried. It was clear that it was his duty to give information to the authorities, yet to do that would be to land Molly Seymour in the dock—the girl who had saved his life, the beautiful, high-spirited girl who was probably acting, out of sheer devilment, under the influence of others.

Hang it all, a man couldn't do that!

Michael saw a swift and vivid picture of himself as principal witness giving evidence that would bring ruin to that woman who had come out of the darkness to him on those eerie harbour flats. He could see those laughing, thoughtful eyes fixed on him in contempt. They would be defiant to the end, he knew.

No, it was no affair of his to do a policeman's job, and no credit to him to be blazoned to the world as a mischief-making spy.

But as his keen brain reviewed the position from every aspect, it became more and more clear that this game couldn't go on for long. The Seymours were riding for an inevitable smash, and insensibly his point of view changed.

Molly had to be warned of the fire with which she was playing. She must be saved from the certain danger and disgrace towards which she was heading.

He owed her a good turn if any man did. Michael fell to pondering how he could repay his debt.

It was about eleven o'clock when a message was brought to his room to say he was wanted on the telephone.

His first thought was 'Molly.' She was ringing him up to ask him to tea, and here was a Heaven-sent opportunity to talk to her and give her that warning.

He called out that he would put on a dressing-gown and come down. But the voice that spoke to him on the telephone was not that of Molly Seymour; it was the crisp, decided tone of Catherine Stanford, his eldest sister, who asked:

"Michael, what's all this I hear about you being in a nursing home?"

"Well, just that," he answered, trying to hide his disappointment.

"I'd better come and see you. Dick and I only got home last night. If you'd only let me know, we would have come home before."

Michael groaned to himself. Catherine was fifteen years older than he was. All his life she had managed him—and the rest of the family. She had a perfect genius for running other peoples' affairs.

"You don't want to come all the way out here, Kitty," he said. "It's miles away. I'm all right."

"Indeed I shall come. I think you've been very thoughtless not to let us know more about yourself."

Michael surrendered; he always had to the firmness of his eldest sister. But he tried to compromise.

"Well, look here," he begged. "You're in London, I suppose. Drive up to Ipswich and I'll meet you there this afternoon. Then you can get back to-night. There's no possible place for you to stay here. It's on a mudbank."

"Very well," she agreed with obvious disapproval. "I'll leave in a few minutes. Where do we meet?"

He told her the Great White Horse, for that was the only hotel he had ever heard of in the town, and soon after lunch he alighted from a hired car, outside that famous Pickwickian inn, to find Catherine Stanford already waiting in the lounge with her most managing expression upon her clear-cut, strangely youthful face.

Kitty Carteret had married Richard Stanford, only son of a very rich banker, when Michael was at his first preparatory school; and since then she had managed her husband into even greater riches and several minor posts in various Cabinets.

The Stanfords were a power in the land, and Dick had twice refused good appointments because Kitty was determined that the time had come when he should take Cabinet rank or none at all.

Kitty took charge of her brother much as a stern governess takes charge of a refractory pupil.

"Now tell me all about it, Michael," she commanded.

He told her.

"But I don't understand," she said. "Is this a mental home?"

He nodded, taking an impish delight in shocking her.

"More or less," he answered.

"But there's no insanity in the family."

"I didn't want to create the precedent."

"Nonsense. Who did you go to?"

"Sir Robert Sark."

"Fashionable and expensive, I suppose."

"Expensive—yes. I haven't had my first month's bill yet, but I should imagine Monte Carlo in the season would be cheap compared with it."

"Then why didn't you go to Monte? It would have done you much more good."

"Because I went to Sark instead, and he prescribed Salthithe."

Mrs. Stanford sniffed.

"I don't believe in this modern fad of rushing to doctors for everything," she said. "But anyhow, you might have told your family more about it. Father doesn't know you're in a sort of an asylum; he'll be frightfully worried when he does."

"That's why I didn't tell him," Michael answered simply.

But Kitty Stanford was genuinely sorry for her brother, and, having exercised her elder-sisterly rights, she mellowed, and over tea she extracted from Michael some account of life at The Warren.

"What do you do with yourself in this dreadful place?" she asked. "Is there any—any treatment?"

She was quite plainly distressed, and Michael relented.

"Oh, cheer up, Kitty," he replied with a guilty smile. "It's not really a dotty home. Mine is a sort of vigorous rest cure. I'm supposed to be out of doors all day. But the cunning of the place is that it's so isolated that you're positively shut off from all normal life. And after a bit you don't seem to want it."

She looked relieved.

"What sort of people are they there?" she queried. "Are they intelligent?"

"Not very," Michael said with a rueful smile. "There was one amusing woman there—ah, yes, you were probably helping to pay her huge expenses; she was your dressmaker—'Madame England.'"

"What! Sophie Vizard?"

"Yes. I didn't know you knew her name."

"Indeed I do; and a very unpleasant woman she is, too. She makes no more clothes for me."

Michael was amused at his sister's sudden indignation. Kitty Stanford prided herself, with reason, upon being one of the best dressed women in London, and her brother could see her almost preening herself as she glanced at her most expensive and most perfect clothes.

"Why, what happened?" he asked.

"The woman's a common fraud. I've only just discovered that she is 'The Albion Frock Company.' In fact, Dick heard it in the City. It's one of those cheap firms with branches all over the place, and they sell things for next to nothing. I don't want one of Sophie Vizard's models, that I pay fifty guineas for, copied and sold for any little chorus girl or shop girl to buy at one of her provincial shops. I even passed one of them driving here—with frocks at two guineas. Heaven knows how the woman does it. Sweated labour, I suppose."

Michael was vastly entertained by this outburst.

"She's got a head on her shoulders, anyhow," he laughed.

"She's clever enough; too clever. But she'll lose all her decent customers. Not that I suppose she cares, for she seems to be minting money. I passed her just outside London as I was driving up. Her car must have cost two thousand, and her furs twice that."

"What! Do you mean to-day?" he asked with a sudden, keen interest.

"Just before one. Near Ilford."

Michael changed the subject deftly and got back to family matters, though here, he realized, was another thread in the tangled skein of Dyke Farm and its doings.

Catherine Stanford left in her huge limousine soon after tea, and her brother drove back in his hired Ford through a frosty dusk to The Warren.

Sophie was presenting the most difficult problem to him at the moment. What was her game? So she was the Albion Frock Company whose full-page advertisements had been splashed in every newspaper for weeks past.

He was still wondering, advancing a succession of wild theories, only to discard them as absurd, when the car pulled up in the darkness at the door of The Warren.

Carteret was going straight upstairs to his room when Mr. Pell came out into the hall.

"Oh, there you are," he said in quite an intimate way for Mr. Pell. "The Major and Miss Seymour called to see you, but they couldn't wait. They bade me say that they would be delighted if you would lunch at the Grange to-morrow, and they very kindly included me in the invitation.

## III.

Carteret hardly knew whether to be glad or sorry when they started off for Street Grange the next morning.

It seemed funny that Mr. Pell should have been invited to join the party, but on the whole, he decided, perhaps it was fortunate that he was coming. A party of three was always awkward, and he wanted an opportunity to talk alone with Molly, although now, as the car was rushing towards the Grange, and that opportunity, Michael's earlier idea of warning Molly of the danger and folly of her conduct became a less and less desirable task.

How could he begin? he asked himself. One could not go to one's hostess and say boldly: "Look here, I saw you smuggling last night. You've got to stop it or you'll get into trouble."

He frowned, and Mr. Pell, who was watching him quietly, said:

"You are very silent this morning, Mr. Carteret. I trust you are quite well."

Michael roused himself.

"Oh, perfectly, thanks," he answered with a laugh. "I think it's the air; it makes one sleepy."

Mr. Pell began to talk about the Seymours. "Such very charming and hospitable people," he described them.

"I presume this is not your first visit?" Carteret asked innocently.

"Indeed it is. I was overwhelmed when Miss Seymour insisted that I should come. It seemed so like intruding."

Again Michael laughed. It occurred to him that if he could only get the Major and Mr. Pell off together he would have a chance to talk with Molly. He remembered the Major's 'vice.'

"Do you play chess by any chance?" he asked suddenly.

Mr. Pell's mild brown eyes showed a swift but passing alertness.

"I have played a good deal in my time," he answered modestly.

"I hear the Major has a passion for the game. You two should get on very well together," Carteret commented.

"Do you think I might suggest a game?" asked Mr. Pell in his self-deprecatory way.

"Why, of course," Michael answered.

The car was running down from the breezy bleakness of Hithe Heath, and Carteret leaned forward to take in the view across the harbour, which now appeared on their right.

In its clump of trees, Dyke on the far side of the water looked as dreary as ever. Yet what a secret that place had to tell! Was the contraband still hidden behind its neglected walls? he wondered.

Aware that again he was dropping into a prolonged silence, he began an animated discussion with Mr. Pell upon the possibility of reclaiming all this marsh land and putting it to some good use.

"Yes, I admit the economy of it," Mr. Pell said rather sadly as they slowed to turn into the drive of Street Grange, "yet I should rather regret it. One feels we should leave some sanctuary for the wild birds."

Michael checked an involuntary smile. There was something pathetic about the simple sincerity of the little man.

## IV.

Lunch at the Grange was a jolly informal function. The Major was at his best, displaying the unostentatious hospitality and an innate courtesy that savoured of past days.

Quite unembarrassed, he announced: "We shall have to wait on ourselves. The days of proper servants have passed for us," and Molly added, in highest spirits:

"But I may tell you that we have a very good cook, Mr. Carteret. I ought to know, because I'm the cook."

Mr. Pell beamed.

"One does not associate such beauty and charm with cooking. It will add to the attraction of the meal an unusual experience," he said pedantically, bowing slightly as he paid the old-fashioned compliment.

Molly curtsied.

"Thank you, Mr. Pell," she replied.

The lunch was served in a long, low room, from the white panelled walls of which some half-dozen portraits of dead and gone Seymours were suspended.

There were oysters, from a neighbouring creek, as the Major explained, a dish of teal, which Molly boasted she had not only cooked, but shot, herself, and an apple-pie, about which Mr. Pell became lyrical.

"If I were not an aged and crusted bachelor, Major," he smiled, "I should bribe your cook away from you and live to a ripe old age entirely upon such apple-pies."

Carteret was once more astounded at this other side of Mr. Pell, generally so shy and diffident. He recalled their trip together to Pool Island, when the little man had displayed such an unexpected ease and so worldwide a knowledge of men and affairs. This general shyness, he thought, must be part of Mr. Pell's nervous trouble; the reason for him being in Dr. Adam's care.

The Seymours were obviously charmed with their surprising guest, and when at last the Major disappeared to get a bottle of port, Molly and Mr. Pell had developed a frivolous and exaggerated flirtation, and Michael was feeling rather out of things.

The Major returned and filled the glasses with an excellent wine.

"This is an occasion for one of the last few bottles," he said cheerfully. "We've had a little luck to-day, Carteret. I've let Dyke Farm."

"Really!"

The word came with obvious amazement from Michael's lips. He knew instantly that he had displayed too great a surprise. He finished weakly:

"That's the lonely old place on the other side of the harbour, isn't it?"

"The place Dr. Adam said Mr. Pell wanted," Molly put in naturally.

"And now," said Mr. Pell in an amusingly doleful voice, "it is too late."

In the laughter that followed Michael managed to recover his self-possession.

"Of course, there's nothing much to it, but it's one responsibility off my shoulders—a little coming in where before it was going out."

There was just a tinge of bitterness in the Major's tone.

"Who's taken it?" Michael queried casually. "A local man?"

"No." Molly interposed before her father could reply. "The local people have too much sense. It's a freak, a rich amateur, thank goodness."

"I don't know who the fellow is," Seymour said, smiling at his daughter. "Ray is the name, Arthur Ray. He's a sailing man, I understand, with a taste for wild-fowling, and, I imagine, for solitude——"

And Molly, evidently thrilled with the affair, broke in:

"He's an important person. The agents telephoned this morning that he'd agreed to take it, and an hour later he rang up himself to say he wanted to be in by Christmas, and if it was all the same to us he was going to arrange about doing up the place at once. I expect an army of plumbers, paperhangers, and decorators to arrive at any moment."

"How very precipitate," said Mr. Pell demurely.

"Poor old Dyke will need a lot of doing up," the Major mused. "It's been empty for five years."

Michael Carteret's brain seemed to have divided itself into two parts. One part listened to the conversation and caused him to answer with conviction 'Yes,' 'No,' 'Of course,' and to ask occasional apropos questions; the other was centred upon Dyke and the new tenant, and demanding a logical answer to the query as to whether Mr. Arthur Ray were a genuine person. If so, he was going seriously to incommode Molly's little smuggling games. If not, then the Seymours, and those associated with them, were a deal more cunning than he believed. It seemed almost as though they knew something. Of course, they would know, he recalled, of his discovery of the hidden attic.

"Coffee in the other room," Molly said peremptorily. "You three men run away, I have to help Annie clear the table."

They crossed the hall to the shabby little sitting-room into which Michael had been ushered on his first visit to the house. Very carefully he looked to see if Sophie's trunk were still by the stairs. But he looked in vain.

The Major produced his old brandy and recommended it to the attention of his guests, and in a few moments Molly came bustling in with a tray of steaming coffee cups.

As they smoked and sipped the excellent cognac, Mr. Pell commented upon the wireless masts he had noticed, driving up to the house.

"It must indeed be a godsend to you in your secluded life here," he said.

"In more ways than one," the Major replied. "I am lucky enough to have a licence to transmit. I dabble in radio in a mild way; you see, the Royal Engineers was my old corps. But the best fun I get out of it is playing chess with an old friend in Ipswich. We often have a game through the air."

"How intensely interesting," Mr. Pell responded. "That use had never occurred to me; it must be a great boon to a lonely man. At one time I rather flattered myself as a chess player."

"The dickens you did," said the Major jovially. "Molly, my dear, the board, please. Mr. Pell, you don't know what you've done. I don't let you leave here until we've had a game."

Molly looked across at Michael Carteret.

"Well, we've got to amuse ourselves, that's all," she laughed. "What shall we do, talk politics or go for a walk?"

"A walk, by all means," he said, jumping to his feet.

"Daddy, we'll give you and Mr. Pell until we've walked to the old Ferry House and back, and if you haven't finished then we'll upset the board."

"Modern daughters are a great problem, Carteret," Seymour answered dryly. "You think yourself lucky you don't own one. Your move, Mr. Pell."

## V.

Molly made no preparations for her walk; she was ready then and there.

"I don't bother about hats," she laughed, reading Michael's questioning gaze. "I like to let my hair breathe. Come on."

They set out across the lawn, through a ragged and neglected kitchen garden, climbed a rough pale fence, and struck cross-country towards the mouth of the harbour.

"I'm going to take you to the sea," she said.

He looked at her in admiration. She was so magnificently fit in body and mind. She wore a short and serviceable tweed skirt with thick heather mixture stockings above a pair of strong brogues. A turtle-necked jersey of a nondescript browny-grey set off the thick tints of her rebellious hair to perfection.

She sniffed the salt air with all the manner of a sailorman.

"We're in for a spell of hard weather," she announced; "there is frost in the air, and the geese are coming in. See 'em?"

She pointed away towards Dyke, where, hardly discernible to Carteret, a big flock of birds flew over the flats.

He felt inferior.

"Are they geese?" he asked.

She laughed mockingly.

"And you call yourself a wild-fowler," she taunted.

"How do you know?" he asked suddenly.

"Peggy Catchpole told me," she answered, looking him full in the face.

Carteret was frankly taken aback.

"So it was you?" he said after a moment. "I'd guessed it. But now at least I have a chance to thank you——"

"I never said it was me," she replied gaily. "It was Peggy who told me. And now, Mr. Carteret, you've got to listen to me. There's Peggy and there's Molly. Peggy is a wild young woman who was born and bred in these marshes. She has to work for her living, and sometimes she goes out shooting at nights to help fill the family pot. And if there's anything over from the pot it goes to the market. And Peggy, one way and another, helps her poverty-stricken family to keep up a respectable appearance.

"And there's Molly, who is quite a different girl. Molly has a dear but feckless father with a sort of position to maintain. Often she would like to change places for good with Peggy; at other times she—oh, she'd give ten years of her life to have a year of civilization."

There came a startling flash of rebellion in those blue eyes.

"But it can't be, Mr. Carteret," she went on quietly, "so Molly works it all out along her own line of philosophy, and is very grateful when a good friend sometimes gives her a few hours of the other life."

She looked far into the hazy distance. Carteret was dumb. This utterly unexpected confession had left him mentally gasping.

Molly brought her gaze back from infinity and turned her eyes so frankly upon his astonished face.

"But Molly," she said with the simplicity of a child, "would have a much harder life if anybody knew about Peggy."

"And Peggy?" he asked quickly.

"Peggy would be dreadfully hurt if anybody guessed she was Molly."

"At least," he said, carried away by the fantasy of the story—half told that told so much—"at least Peggy could tell Molly of a man whom she found in very great danger, and whose life she saved. She could tell her that that man is very, very grateful, and that he would like to thank her somehow, and that he will never forget."

Molly shook her head as if in challenge to a wild gust of biting wind that suddenly ruffled her wayward hair.

"Peggy would say that she wants no thanks except to be forgotten," she answered softly. "But if she ever should want a reward she will ask for it."

They stood silent for some moments. Michael had averted his gaze, aware all the while of Molly's blue eyes fixed calmly upon him.

He was cornered; he knew that. How much this extraordinary girl knew, or how much she thought he knew, he could only surmise. But she had closed his mouth as effectively as by the most solemn of oaths.

"And so that's the end of the story of Peggy and Molly," she said suddenly, with a gay little laugh that seemed to dare him to reopen the subject.

"Not quite," he answered, echoing her queer mood. "I still have to read Peggy's life, which Molly promised to give me."

"You shall. Molly always keeps her promises. She's as faithful in her way as Peggy was."

"Then we'll say," he replied with his quizzical smile that sent little ripples of wrinkles to the corners of his understanding eyes, "that Peggy and Molly is a serial story—to be continued in our next."

"Perhaps," she laughed carelessly—her attractive, husky laugh. "But our next may be a long time off. Meanwhile you've got to see the old Ferry House." And then, woman-like, having declared the story ended, she began to write a further chapter.

The old Ferry House stood near the end of a shingly spit at the very mouth of the harbour. It was a low, solid, little building of flint and boards, black with generations of weather-resisting tar.

Molly unlocked the door.

"You may at least see one of Peggy's haunts," she said, smiling, and she watched his face with a questioning glance as, with a playful wave of the arm, she bade him enter.

And there he found the very replica of the attic room at Dyke—even to the stove and the vacuum flask.

"Peggy has to have some refuge when she's waiting for the tides," she said. "It's a longer walk from here to the Grange on a winter night than you'd think."

Michael surveyed the cosy little chamber, his mind in a hopeless muddle; then impulsively he turned to Molly and said with a strange precision:

"What a very jolly little den! I have never seen one like it in all my life."

Her eyes lit up for a moment with real gratitude.

"Peggy would be awfully pleased to hear that," she answered simply.

It was an hour later before they returned to the Grange. Molly took him round by the sea-beach, a desolate bank of steep shingle that seemed to stretch away into infinity.

Then they turned inland across a marsh which, to Michael, was trackless. But Molly picked her way through oozing sedges and skirted black, miry pools with the ease of one familiar with every inch of the treacherous ground.

They were talking of all sorts and conditions of things then—of books and plays that Molly knew or wanted to know. She was going up to London in a few days for a precious fortnight before Christmas, she said, and she wanted to make full use of every moment of those wonder hours.

As they reached the house, Michael, hardly aware of it, was talking of himself and his work, of his breakdown and his visit to Sir Robert Sark.

He smiled when, at the mention of the great specialist's name, Molly said, as if involuntarily:

"I hate that man."

"Well, at any rate, Molly will have no occasion to seek his aid," he replied lightly. "She is no neurasthenic."

Quite naturally, until then, he had continued the use, in that manner, of her first name, and she showed no sign of resentment, although she addressed him always as Mr. Carteret. But as they crossed the lawn, he felt that they had walked out of fairlyland back into the world of real things, hard and callous. The house looked particularly lone and dreary in the first of the fading light.

Michael became formal again.

"Thank you so much for a jolly walk, Miss Seymour," he said, standing aside at the door for her to enter the house.

She gave a little sigh as she answered:

"It has been fun; I'm so glad you liked it."

They went on to the sitting-room, where Mr. Pell and the Major still sat over the chess-board. Neither looked up for a moment, then the Major slowly moved a piece.

"Mate," he said, with a satisfied smile and swung round to greet Michael.

And Michael started at the word, for it seemed almost as if that wiry, lean-faced man had read his thoughts. The word might have been intended for him.

## VI.

They were driving back to The Warren through the quickly closing darkness of the winter afternoon, and Mr. Pell was chatting loquaciously about his enjoyment of the visit.

Michael, his mind away back in lonely Street Grange, was answering mechanically, just sufficient to satisfy the demands of common courtesy.

"A very unusual man, Major Seymour—very unusual. And such a master of the game." Mr. Pell droned on.

"He's good, is he? I expect he plays a lot."

"Amazingly good. Do you know——"

"Hallo! What's up with the car?" Carteret broke in, his voice for the first time displaying any real interest.

"It appears to be stopping," Mr. Pell put in mildly.

It had stopped, abruptly, and the local driver was out of his seat and had come to the door.

"I'm sorry, sir; I hoped I'd get you home all right, but the radiator's give out. 'E was leakin' this mornin', but I didn't take much notice of that. I filled 'e up well before we left Major Seymour's, but it weren't no good."

The fellow spoke with a bovine expression, uncertain whether he would be blamed or not.

"Where are we? How far have we to go?" Michael asked sharply.

"We're just about the cross-roads, sir; it would be about two mile—perhaps a bit more."

Carteret looked at his companion.

"There's nothing for it but to walk, Mr. Pell," he said.

Mr. Pell rose from his seat.

"We must submit ourselves to fate, Mr. Carteret," he answered. "We may at least be glad it is but two miles—and perhaps a bit more."

Michael smiled, and the driver grinned oafishly.

"All right," Carteret said to the man, "we'll send out and have you towed in. We'd better get the car off the road—not that I imagine it's used much."

Together they shoved the derelict Ford on to the bordering patch of turf, then, turning up their coat collars against a now bitter wind, Michael Carteret and Mr. Bernard Pell set out briskly for Salthithe.

This trivial mishap had shaken Michael from his reverie. The frosty air gave him a sense of elation. It was he who talked most now; Mr. Pell had become taciturn.

But presently he broke a long silence with an entirely irrelevant remark—Michael had been talking of motor-cars for the past ten minutes—about Dyke.

"A very fortunate thing for the Major that he has let that house, don't you think?" Mr. Pell said primly.

"Very," Carteret answered. "Not an easy place to let, I should imagine."

"Yet he must be a strange person who would choose so lonely a house," Mr. Pell went on.

A sudden uneasiness came over Michael. Had Mr. Pell some motive behind his observations? Carteret tried to sheer off the subject.

"Oh, I don't know," he said. "No place is so lonely to a rich man as to a poor one. This fellow Ray must have lots of money from what Miss Seymour said."

Mr. Pell walked on for some time without answering. Michael's uneasiness was not allayed; Mr. Pell was evidently trying to make up his mind to say more.

At length, with a slight preliminary cough, he remarked:

"I wonder if you would think me presuming upon our acquaintance were I to ask your advice. I have been a good deal worried lately, Mr. Carteret."

Michael started.

"Of course not," he answered as naturally as he could. "What's worrying you?"

"Well, it's—it's about this very place—Dyke Farm."

"Yes?" Michael's voice was sharp and anxious.

"A mysterious place, Mr. Carteret; I have a feeling that—that things go on there of which many people have no knowledge."

Carteret forced a laugh.

"This sounds thrilling," he said. "Tell me some more."

He stopped to light a cigarette. There was a very nasty problem about to face him, he knew, for if Mr. Pell had his suspicions of what went on at Dyke Farm, Michael would have to decide at once with whom he would throw in his lot. He must either be for Molly Seymour or against her—and he could not betray her.

"Yes," said Mr. Pell quietly, "I have reason to believe that Dyke is being put to an illegal use, and you, as a man of the law, Mr. Carteret, I thought would be well fitted to advise me what action I should take."

Michael was flurried.

"I must learn more about it before I offer my advice," he replied. "Tell me all you know, Mr. Pell."

"Fantastic as it may seem to you," the little man continued in his mild voice, "I believe that house has been used by a band of smugglers."

"Smugglers! Oh, come, come! We're not living in the eighteenth century. What on earth put that romantic idea in your head?"

It was an effort to throw a note of incredulous amusement into his voice, but Michael managed to laugh quite naturally although he was desperately apprehensive. This looked like disaster for the Seymours.

Mr. Pell went on in his diffident, apologetic way.

"Spending so much time as I do upon the marshes, watching wild-fowl through my glasses, I have observed other doings. The essence of nature study is silence and shelter from others' observation. I have seen and heard strange things in the past few weeks. Dyke, for instance, has not been empty; I wonder you did not find some sign of occupation that day we met there when you told me you had explored the house."

Michael felt trapped.

"It was curious," he answered, thinking hard what line he was to take. "Very curious. Who was there?"

"That I cannot say; one of the fisherfolk, I imagine."

There was relief in Carteret's voice as he responded:

"Then you think these fishermen are smuggling?"

"I think they are in it."

"But why smuggling?"

"It was a night, just before you arrived at The Warren, when, by chance, I lost my way on the Holm Saltings. What I saw then could have been nothing else."

There was a brisker note in Mr. Pell's voice as he made this definite pronouncement.

For the first time the suspicion flashed through Michael's mind that Mr. Pell might well be mixed up in this smuggling too. Had he perhaps been told off to pump him, to find out his attitude in view of what he knew?

It seemed reasonable, now that he thought of it in that light. The surprising invitation to lunch and the natural way in which Mr. Pell and the Major had settled down to chess, leaving Molly free to tackle him in her own way. That unexpected meeting on the marshes, that sense of being followed which had on many occasions come over him. Mr. Pell had cropped up in all sorts of unexpected circumstances.

And Lady Sophie! What simpler yet more subtle way of two strangers coming unsuspected into a lonely neighbourhood than by posing as patients in a rest-cure home! And what better excuse for being about the marshes at all hours than that of a naturalist.

The little man went on unperturbed.

"I was wondering, Mr. Carteret, whether perhaps you had not had your suspicions. Maybe last night on your bicycle ride you saw something?"

"Nothing whatever," Michael answered hastily.

He was being bustled out of his normal, logical self-confidence. Mr. Pell's persistence left him at a loss to grasp the situation properly.

Mr. Pell slackened his pace and raised a hand in a queer old-fashioned attitude, punctuating his words with jerky movements.

" What I want you to advise me is this, Mr. Carteret," he said in a worried tone. " Major Seymour, as owner of the property, might possibly be suspected of some knowledge of the matter. Now, should I first of all warn him, or should I go straight to the authorities?"

The crisis had come, as crises will, with a disconcerting suddenness.

There was no time then for reflection; Michael had to answer quickly and think quickly. And he found himself thinking for Molly, not for himself, not of his duty as a law-abiding citizen. Without realizing it, he had made his decision.

He became mentally alert with that finely balanced agility of mind which had done so much to make his name at the English Bar.

There was a bland, deceptively friendly note in his voice, that had been the undoing of many a witness when Mr. Michael Carteret rose to cross-examine, as he replied to Mr. Pell's staggering question.

" I think we had better understand one another very clearly," he began. " And to start with I will admit to you that I did find signs of occupation at Dyke."

" Ah, indeed! Then I was right."

" You were, and so you were about last night."

" Really?"

The little man seemed immensely interested.

" Now, I don't know how much you know about this matter, and I'm not at all sure that I want you to tell me," Michael continued in his most professional tone. "But you've asked for my advice, and I'll give it to you. There is a tremendous merit in ignorance, Mr. Pell." He laughed in a cheerful understanding way. "The first object of the law should be to prevent, not to punish, crime. Are you perfectly sure of your facts? Answer me that. Would you go into a witness-box and swear that what you have suggested to me was true?"

"Well—I—I——" Mr. Pell hesitated.

Michael picked him up sharply.

"Exactly. As I thought," he said genially. "You are almost sure, but not sure enough to swear to it. That's it, isn't it?" He left his companion no time to answer. "So consider what would be the result of your quite conscientious action. Devastating, Mr. Pell. Suspicions cast upon a score of people; innocent folk suspected of evil-doing—the guilty probably cunning enough to escape—the terrible probability of some quite guiltless fisherman being convicted of an offence he never committed. One should hesitate before taking an irrevocable step in such circumstances."

"Quite, quite," murmured Mr. Pell weakly.

"Then I would say to you, if you have any doubts—take refuge in ignorance. Of course, should such a thing as you—we—suspect, occur again, were it within our power we should have to do our best to prevent it. But the odds are it may never happen again. This farm, Dyke, is let now. It will be occupied, so that, were our suspicions correct, the place can no longer be put to its old bad use. But—well—I can best summarize my whole point of view by saying that until you raised the question, I proposed to take no action at all. I had, in fact, euphemistically forgotten all I imagined."

Mr. Pell sighed.

"You have lifted a very great weight from my mind," he said. "I quite see your point, Mr. Carteret, you have put it with such conviction. One *should* be perfectly sure. The dreadful possibility of some innocent person becoming involved appals me. It might even be our charming host, the Major, or that sweet daughter of his. I had not considered that."

Michael, too, sighed, but with an immense relief.

"We'll keep our own counsel about this, Mr. Pell," he said. "You know what country people are."

"Such gossips," said Mr. Pell with an air of discovery.

"We'll keep our eyes open in case it should happen again, but we'll do nothing now."

"Very sound advice indeed. I am so glad I ventured to seek your help."

"And so am I," Michael agreed, with more sincerity than his companion suspected.

"Thank you most heartily," said Mr. Pell.

They finished their walk, chatting amiably with a new sense of intimacy, and that night, before dinner, Carteret caused his seat at table to be changed so that he might be next to the little bird man. He really liked him now. Whether or no he was in league with the Seymours Michael was still uncertain; but, at any rate, he had made his line of conduct clear.

The conversation over the evening meal was largely about Dyke and its new tenant. The news had spread through Salthithe with amazing swiftness.

Mr. Stacey Archibald, the soured Balliol scholar, sometime fellow-student at Oxford of Mr. Justice Carteret, was full of stories he had culled from the local gossips.

Mr. Ray had been at the farm that very afternoon and the workmen were to begin operations on the morrow. Already a van had arrived with a few sticks of furniture, ladders, paint-pots, and things. Mr. Ray had engaged two decorators from Ipswich, who were to live and work in the house until the job was finished.

"And plenty of work they'll have to do, too," Mr. Pell announced brightly to a table agog for news. "The Major was only saying at lunch-time to-day that the place had been untenanted for five years."

Michael Carteret felt that whatever Mr. Bernard Pell might prove to be, he was undoubtedly a stanch ally.

# CHAPTER IV

## I.

MOLLY went up to town a couple of days later.

She arrived late on a foggy afternoon, dumped her scanty luggage with the porter at Sophie Vizard's flat in Westminster, and drove straight on in the cab to Dover Street, where, at what appeared to be a private house, a plain brass plate inscribed 'Madame England' denoted one of the most exclusive and expensive dressmakers in the whole of London.

Molly was ushered through a thickly carpeted, softly lighted 'salon' to Sophie's own private office at the back. Madame England was busy over some business matters with her secretary.

She waved a hand gaily to Molly, crying, "I won't be a moment; cigarettes in that box," and went on in a crisp, efficient tone with her affairs.

Sophie was dressed plainly in black, and looked for all the world as though her whole life had been spent in dressmaking.

This was a deliberate and most successful pose. In the Dover Street establishment Lady Sophie Vizard, born Lady Sophie Appledore, did not exist. Madame England ruled that establishment with Prussian discipline. Sophie's rich friends, and their rich friends, who came there were consistently snubbed if they addressed her by her real name. And Sophie's snubs hurt.

The lightest punishment for the persistent offender was to be handed over to the forewoman; in extreme cases the *maison* was unable to find anything to suit the offending client. Sophie reckoned that, although she lost a good deal by this strict routine, she made more. Rich women talked about her cranky ways to one another, vowed that for their part they refused to put up with such insolence. But they did, humbly, and Sophie's banking account grew.

Only to the very new, very rich, and to the very biggest theatrical favourites, did Madame England unbend. But that paid in subsequent advertisement.

Molly smoked her cigarette quietly and took in her surroundings.

The whole place oozed opulence and comfort in such violent contrast to the raw hardships of life at Street Grange, and the bitter night winds in the choppy tideway on Walm Harbour. Here, every sound was muffled, every light subdued. A pleasing warmth pervaded everything.

"Very well. That's all, Miss Gidding, thank you." Sophie had finished at last.

The perfectly trained secretary picked up her papers, with hardly a rustle, and moved quietly to the door. Molly eyed her severely plain black dress, which was, in the very severity of its plainness, conspicuous in its perfection. Sophie was clever, diabolically clever. Miss Gidding was by nature stout, shapeless, and clumsy; Madame England's genius made her appear trim and almost dainty. Many an affluent and portly dowager had taken Ethel Gidding's example to heart, to the greater benefit of the house of England.

"Good-night, madame," Miss Gidding said in honeyed tones, opening the door silently.

"Good-night, Miss Gidding."

Sophie waited for the door to close; then:

"Molly, chuck me a cigarette," she demanded. "That's that for the day. Give me a few moments to change, and then we'll celebrate, my dear. You and your father have been simply splendid."

"It's all clear, then?" Molly queried, her eyes lighting up with excitement.

"Everything. The last lot was in this afternoon. It was wonderful." Her grey-green eyes glowed with greedy pleasure.

She lit her cigarette and disappeared into a little dressing-room leading out of the office, continuing her conversation through the half-open door as she changed.

"Whose idea was it to get it away like that?" Molly asked, eager as a child.

"Oh, his, of course."

"But it was so simple. Why didn't we think of it?"

"That's what I said, but he only sneered."

"He would."

Molly sat thinking for a few moments while sounds of dressing came from the inner room. Presently Sophie called out:

"I say, Molly, come in here. I've got a present for a good girl."

"For me?"

Molly's voice thrilled with pleasure and candour.

Sophie laughed.

"You don't seem to have any doubts about it," she said.

Confused a little, the girl answered frankly:

"Well, I meant I hoped it was for me."

"And so it is, dear. Look, either of those frocks any good to you?"

Sophie closed the inner door as Molly stood, her big eyes opened wide in admiration at two of the most exquisite of Madame England's creations set out, with studied carelessness, across a big chesterfield drawn up in front of a cosy fire.

Sophie had changed by now and went across to a long mirror, dabbing at her hair preparatory to pulling on a dainty little hat.

"Do you really mean it?" Molly asked joyously.

"For who else?" Sophie asked casually. "But don't thank me, my dear. The red one Lady Beckton sent back this morning for alteration because her husband thought it too daring. Madame England does not alter, my dear Molly. Lady Beckton will have another frock—and her husband will pay for that and for this one too."

Sophie gave a hard little laugh.

"I think it's simply adorable," Molly gasped.

"Then I'll have it packed up for you, child."

She rang a bell, and a silent-footed assistant appeared, as if by magic, and whisked the filmy garment away.

"Have it put in the car, Miss Sims," Sophie ordered coldly.

Molly was profuse in her thanks. Though she knew she would not have half a dozen chances to wear the dress, it was sheer joy to her to play a tiny part in the great gay world of which she saw so little.

Sophie motioned her to sit down.

"Before we go," she said, "tell me what you've done about the romantic Michael Carteret."

Molly stiffened, imperceptibly, at the half sneer in the voice.

"Oh, I've settled him all right," she said after a moment. "I've as good as told him I know he knows—well, lots of things he shouldn't know, and that I'd take it jolly unfriendly of him if he made a song about it."

Sophie's eyes narrowed.

"I hope to goodness you didn't say anything rash," she said uneasily.

"Don't worry, Sophie. Give me credit for some common sense." Molly was suddenly the girl of Street Grange, the girl of the marshes again. "I had to shut him up somehow. He's a dear delightful thing, and it was almost too easy. He's safe enough on what's past. But it's just as well you're getting him out of the place before we run another lot. He's too inquisitive, my dear. And so terribly grateful. I'd be much happier to know that he was a hundred miles away next time Dan Davis comes into the harbour."

Sophie Vizard's brow wrinkled thoughtfully.

"But we've changed our plans, Molly dear," she said with studied indifference. "We have decided to leave Mr. Carteret where he is for the time being."

## II.

Molly tried both then and later, during her stay in London, to find out exactly what Sophie meant by this unexpected change of plan. But Sophie was evasive.

It was considered unwise, she explained vaguely, to add to Michael's suspicions. . . . Time enough to take action later if necessary. . . . Let the matter die down.

"After all," as Sophie once said frankly, "it's you, not what you're doing, that he is interested in. Even if we did get him away now, he'd only be coming back to see you when we least wanted him."

Molly hated these insinuations of Sophie's, the more because she felt there was some truth in them. Yet what could she do? Michael Carteret was an amusing enough acquaintance, but he was going to be a nuisance if he hung about her all the time.

She let the matter drop for a while and gave herself up to the good time Sophie offered her.

The fortnight's holiday ran all too swiftly to its end—a fortnight crammed full of life so different from the normal monotony of Street. That evening, the last of her visit, Sophie was taking her out to dinner and on, afterwards, to a reception at the house of a political cousin of hers.

"If it's too dreadfully dull we'll leave early and go on somewhere gayer," she said. "But I've simply got to turn up. It's not good for business to drop entirely out of the old life. The rich dowagers nudge one another and say: 'That's Sophie Vizard who runs the dressmaker's shop.' Then they talk scandal about me for half an hour, and probably turn up at Dover Street the next day to buy a frock and look at me at close quarters."

Sophie gave a defiant laugh, and Molly smiled at the bitter comment upon the frailty of the society in which Sophie moved when she felt like it.

But she sighed a little enviously as Sophie's maid put the finishing touches to her dressing. Life had been so satisfyingly comfortable in the past two weeks. Sophie's flat was the last word in unostentatious luxury.

Molly glanced at the big, soft, divan bed with its thick quilt of old rose-coloured silk. How needless it was there on that perfect bed, in which you could snuggle down and feel that you never wanted to get out of it! Though when you did, it was on to a thick pile carpet, so warm and comforting to the feet that Molly deliberately discarded slippers as she walked about the floor.

She thought of the room she would occupy the next night, shabby and draughty, with its hard, threadbare carpet and its lumpy bed, in which, no matter how many clothes you piled on, the bitter east winds seemed somehow always to find their way.

To-morrow, a guttering candle, or at best a smoky, smelly lamp in place of these softly shaded lights. To-morrow, an oil-stove to heat the bare room instead of the hidden magic of radiators that kept a welcome even temperature.

Sophie came bustling into the room puffing a freshly lighted cigarette.

"Ready, dear?" she asked.

"Just a moment," Molly answered.

They reached the Gunters' house in Mayfair soon after ten. Oliver Gunter's mother had been an Appledore, and he was counted a very promising young man by his party. He was Member for a North Country borough, which he had held by sheer personality. And Edith, his wife, had an extraordinary flair for turning dull, semi-political receptions into quite jolly functions.

She mixed the most unlikely people with amazing success. Rough and self-conscious local big-wigs from Oliver's constituency arrived, nervously curious, to leave after having had a glorious time talking—mostly about themselves—to famous authors or Cabinet Ministers. And they in turn, under Edith's magic management, enjoyed themselves immensely too.

"Heaven knows who we'll meet," Sophie murmured, as they went up the stairs. "Quite possibly a trades' union official hobnobbing with a minor royalty."

Molly, a little frightened, was none the less thrilled.

The first hour of that reception was to her a rather alarming dream of delight. Her early shyness past, she found herself fascinated. She talked with a score of people, few of whose names she remembered.

Two large rooms thrown into one were crowded, yet guests were announced every minute. Sophie pointed out the lions of the evening—two ambassadors, a famous general, well-known politicians, and, later on, one of the most popular of serious actresses, who, only the night before, Molly had seen on the stage.

Then in the crush Sophie and she were separated, but Molly wandered about quite contentedly. It was all so wonderful.

But presently, in an alcove on the far side of the room, she caught sight of Sophie's jade-green dress, and she wormed her way towards it.

Sophie was talking to a tall, red-faced man who looked like a master of foxhounds. His hair was close-cropped and grey, but there was something vaguely familiar about his humorous eyes and his straight mouth. Sophie saw her and beckoned.

"Here is my errant charge, Sir Guy," she said gaily. "Molly, this is Sir Guy Carteret, our Mr. Carteret's father. We've just been talking about him and The Warren."

The Judge bowed with a friendly smile.

"I was just telling Lady Sophie," he said, "that I went down to see my son at the week-end. I was getting quite anxious about him. These nervous breakdowns are unpleasant things. But still"—he turned gallantly to Sophie—"if you, my dear lady, are an example of the curative effects of Dr. Adam's treatment, I have little fear for Michael. I see no sign of mental or physical weakness about you."

Molly was feeling curiously ill at ease; she was thinking how unlike her conception of a Judge was this simple, kindly old gentleman.

With a little flush of colour, she asked, for the sake of saying something:

"And how did you find Mr. Carteret?"

"Bored—frankly bored," Sir Guy answered.

"Positively bucolic. He's reverting to type; he looks like his grandfather, a dull country squire, and he seems to spend all his time shooting wild-fowl and taking incredibly long walks. But fit—oh, healthy as a ploughboy!"

"It's a wonderful country to make you fit," Sophie put in with a laugh. "Look at Molly; she's lived all her life on that coast, and if she only knew how I hated her for her schoolgirl complexion!"

Molly flushed again, and the old man smiled in an understanding way.

"Never you mind, my dear," he said. "I agreed with Lady Sophie. And so would most of the women in this room, in their hearts."

He talked on for some minutes, trying to console her for Sophie's teasing. He had a pleasing manner, very reminiscent of his son. And the way he said 'But there was a dreary old stick at this doctor's place—old Stacey Archibald,' brought unrestrained laughter to Molly's lips.

Sophie broke into the conversation.

"I shall be seeing Mr. Carteret in a few days," she said. "I am spending Christmas with the Seymours."

"Oh, indeed!"

Molly was suddenly conscious of a strained look upon Sophie's face. Involuntarily her eyes followed her almost furtive glance.

Drifting towards them through the crowd was the huge figure of Sir Robert Sark. His face was impassive as ever, and on all sides people looked sidelong at him, as though unwillingly fascinated by his expressionless features.

Sophie said hurriedly:

"It's time I took my young charge home, Sir Guy."

The presence of Sark seemed to make itself felt as the sudden chill before a summer storm. There was something ominous about the man.

"You must guard that complexion," the Judge laughed.

The specialist made straight for the group and bowed woodenly to Sophie.

Sir Guy looked up with a friendly nod.

"I've just been congratulating one of your patients upon her marvellous recovery," he said genially. "And I hear my son has had to seek your aid."

"Mr. Michael Carteret—ah, yes. I hope we'll soon have that brilliant young man well again."

There was a human note in the doctor's voice, but it changed to a metallic monotone as he turned to Lady Sophie.

"And I am delighted to hear that you have quite recovered," he said.

"Quite, thanks," Sophie answered coldly, her eyes fixed upon the man's grim face.

The flint-grey eyes lighted for a moment with amusement.

"I trust the improvement will be permanent," he said with a sinister smile.

"To make sure, Lady Sophie tells me she's going to take another dose of the famous Salthithe air," the Judge put in.

"Not Salthithe—Street," Sophie retorted sharply. "I am going to stay with the Seymours, not with Dr. Adam. The air's better there."

"Undoubtedly," Sark said with studied irony.

"Come, Molly, my dear, it's time we tried to get out of this crush," Sophie responded. "Good-bye, Sir Guy. Good-evening."

The Judge smiled his adieux; the doctor seemed already to have forgotten Lady Sophie and her companion. He began at once an earnest conversation with Mr. Justice Carteret. They were still talking, Molly noticed, when at last she forced her way to the doors.

### III.

Since the middle of December a notice on vellum, with gaily decorated initials suggestive of some medieval manuscript, had informed Madame England's clients that 'In order that the staff may enjoy a well-deserved holiday . . .' the place would be closed from the day before Christmas Eve until the first Monday in the New Year.

Madame England made that hard-worked staff of hers play its part in the general tone of the house. She extracted the utmost from it, largely on the principle of making the girls work themselves to exhaustion while they worked, but giving them liberal holidays and generous pay. And, though they grumbled at her for a slave driver among themselves, they spoke, more honestly, of her to the customers as a good mistress. And that helped trade amazingly.

There was an unusual Christmas rush this year, and Sophie worked in her salon as hard as any of her assistants.

It was past the closing hour on the day after Molly's departure, but an exacting customer had been beguiled by Sophie's wearied, yet sympathetic, tongue into buying just one more frock for 'my sweet little niece.'

The woman was a vulgar, but immensely rich, English wife of an Australian cattle magnate.

"And now, madame, how much is it that you've made me spend?" she asked, the final purchase completed.

Sophie knew her client, and liked her because of her rare virtue of paying cash.

"I'll send my secretary," she smiled, as with a pretty apology she drifted gracefully away to her office.

In that holy of holies, approached with temerity even by the unimpeachable Miss Gidding, a man sat reading the evening newspaper.

"Another five minutes and I'm free," Sophie said as she entered. She rang the bell. "I've a couple of minutes' grace. Oh, Miss Gidding," as the silent secretary appeared in answer to the ring, "Mrs. Blane-Crawford wants her bill. There was——" She detailed the expensive purchases. "Bring me the account and I'll present it myself."

Miss Gidding faded out.

"It's a devil of a life, Derek," Sophie sighed.

"Not such a bad devil if you can make that much out of him in half an hour," the man commented dryly.

"Oh, I don't know," Sophie said peevishly. "You don't know the Mrs. Blane-Crawfords. Opulent costermongers, I call them. But rich! So one has to be polite. So polite, Derek. I wouldn't stand a tithe of their insolence from my own people." Sophie's voice grew vindictive.

"That's the greatest advantage of wealth," the man answered with a cynical smile. "You can patronize your betters and they daren't answer back."

"Derek, you're a pig," Sophie protested. "But shut up; here's the Giddy."

A knock at the door announced the return of the secretary.

"Thank you, Miss Gidding." Sophie was frigidly professional again. "Don't bother to wait."

With a grimace at the man she went straight out to the salon.

Mrs. Blane-Crawford scanned her bill, frowning.

"Your prices, madame, grow horribly," she said with a sniff. "Really, this is exorbitant. I know, of course——" She was rather frightened at having said so much, in her natural revolt against the extravagance years of lower middle-class life had taught her to resist instinctively.

"But you forget," said Madame England in her humblest and most honeyed tones, "you forget, madame, the terrible duty we have to pay upon silk nowadays. Don't blame us poor modistes; blame the Government. It's not our fault."

Mrs. Blane-Crawford was mollified. It was warming to her heart to have the daughter of a peer appealing to her in this way.

"Of course, I'd forgotten," she said, magnanimously opening her cheque-book.

Sophie herself ushered her to a shining saloon car, then returned with becoming dignity to her office.

"And now, my dear Derek," she announced, slamming the door behind her, "we can have our talk. Mrs. Blane-Something has departed dreadfully sorry about this wicked silk duty. Isn't it a shame!" She laughed mockingly. "A cigarette, please. Thanks. Now, then, tell me how you like being Mr. Arthur Ray of Dyke Farm."

The man addressed as Derek moved lazily in his chair.

"It's a rotten job," he said in a dissatisfied way. "I don't like it. I was a fool to be dragged into it."

"But it's only for a week or two," Sophie answered, blowing a great cloud of smoke from her cigarette.

"Might be more than that, in peculiar discomfort, if we get caught," he commented peevishly.

Sophie flung herself into a big easy-chair.

"Oh, for Heaven's sake, Derek, don't get cold feet," she said impatiently. "Who's going to catch us? And if they catch anybody, it's the Seymours, not us."

"Oh yes! They'd go to prison without saying a word about anybody else, wouldn't they? I see them," he sneered.

Sophie became curiously grave.

"As a matter of fact, they would," she said; "but, of course, you couldn't understand that."

The man flushed.

"Well, anyhow, I'd be just as glad to be out of it," he protested.

"But as you're not," Sophie said, pressing her advantage, "we may as well talk business. You can't get out of it, so it's no good squealing."

"I'm not squealing," he blustered.

"Of course not," she retorted with a touch of contempt.

He reached for a cigarette.

"Well, what do you want me to tell you?" he asked in a sulky tone.

"Everything."

He sat in silence for some moments, puffing at his smoke.

Derek Holmes—who had been born in Amsterdam Dirk De Heems—was not a pleasant man. In London his name was unsavoury. The Stock Exchange remembered him as the man who had disappeared on the day after a particularly nasty financial scandal—a matter of a practically fraudulent company flotation. That was in '14, just before the war.

Since then he was spoken of vaguely as 'in Paris.' What he did there few people knew. In fact, he had made an extremely good living as a go-between; introducing capital to brains and brains to capital, taking a very substantial commission on every transaction, and not caring in the least whether the matter concerned was honest or not.

Derek Holmes, with the keen business acumen of his Dutch-Jew father, was solely interested in making money for Derek Holmes.

At fifty, he had a theatrically attractive face, sleek, greying-black hair, well-formed features, and an engaging, if too conciliatory, manner.

At the moment, nominally, he was Madame England's buyer in France; but only about a third of those rich, silk materials and wonderful model frocks, that were purchased so much cheaper across the Channel, paid duty when they entered this country. The bulk of what was bought, Dan Davis delivered on dark and foggy nights at the little hardway which ran into Walm Harbour close by Dyke Farm.

Lady Sophie eyed Derek Holmes with distaste.

"You are not very communicative," she observed with irony.

"Well, there's not much to say," he answered defensively. "The stuff was all safely cleared from that dismal farm a fortnight ago. Heavens, Sophie, that place gives me the creeps!" He shuddered. "I should go potty if I had to stay there long."

Sophie gave a low mocking laugh.

"Not quite so bright as the boulevards, eh? Never mind, it will be a nice rest cure for you."

He scowled, but she went on unperturbed.

"I do think it was a lovely idea to get all the stuff away in those vans that took your painters and decorators. Can't you see the humour of that, Derek? The whole precious cargo brought right under the nose of the whole place."

He gave a sour smile.

"Yes. I suppose that's all right. But what about the next lot?"

"Same thing, my dear man. You move your furniture in on the morning after the run, and the empty vans will go back as before—empty, of course!"

Sophie thoroughly enjoyed the joke. Derek Holmes couldn't see it.

"In the meanwhile, I've got to show up at that God-forgotten spot, so that if anything goes wrong I'll be suspected. That's what it is, Sophie, and a damn poor game, if you ask me," he said savagely.

Sophie's queer eyes hardened as she sat back in her chair.

"You make me tired," she replied viciously. "You're just a coward, afraid of the dark. Why, that girl, Molly Seymour, has slept alone in Dyke scores of times. She's not scared of bogeys. It looks to me, Derek, that if you go on like this you'll give the whole show away. You'd better get out of it—if you can."

There was a cruel taunt in her last words that brought the blood to his cheeks.

"There's no need to make all this fuss," he said. "I never said I wanted to get out of it; I only meant it was a dreary job—and you know it. I'll play the game all right, only it's this hanging about that gets on my nerves."

"I'm glad of that," Sophie retorted frigidly.

He went on.

"And it would get on your nerves, too," he said. "I've got a sort of feeling that I'm watched all the time."

"You are," she announced blandly.

"I know; I don't mean by our chaps, I mean by someone else."

She laughed.

"Don't you worry about that. Our chaps, as you call them, will see you are all right."

He looked almost distraught.

"That's a thing that makes me creepy, too," he went on. "I don't know which of those wood-faced rustics are in the know and who aren't. According to you——"

"My dear Derek, so far as you are concerned, nobody is in the know except your two painters. And you'd better not forget that."

He frowned sulkily, and Sophie asked cheerfully:

"Now, who have you met down there—Dr. Adam?"

"Yes, he gave me a remarkably good lunch the other day. But his patients! What's he got, a sort of asylum?"

"Something of the kind. Did you meet Mr. Carteret?"

"Yes. Queer chap. He seems sane enough, though."

"And Mr. Bernard Pell?"

"Lord! That little bore. Talked birds. I ask you, Sophie, talked about the habit of sea-gulls to me!"

"Well, I hope you pretended to know something," she said, a little amused. "You're supposed to be very keen on sailing and wild-fowl shooting. That's your make-up."

Holmes nodded.

"Oh, I didn't give it away," he answered quickly. "But I sheered him off. What a dismal little blighter!"

Sophie smiled again, memories of Mr. Pell's earnestness of manner returned to her, then she took up her catechism in a more friendly way. She extracted all she could about Derek Holmes' two brief visits to Salthithe, and restored his good humour by some of her witty comments upon the people there.

"Well, at any rate, you're free for a few days," she consoled him when at last he rose to leave. "We shall meet at Salthithe before long. You'll have all your instructions when you get back. I hope you have a good crossing; give my love to Paris."

"I can't say the same for your Salthithe-on-Mud," he answered, with a shrug of his shoulders, as he left her.

# CHAPTER V

## I.

MICHAEL CARTERET had found his time fully occupied while Molly was away.

For a day or two after his pact, as he termed it mentally, with Mr. Pell, he had been a good deal worried, and the old bad curse of insomnia had returned, with its resultant depressions and reluctance to concentrate or make any decisions.

Rafe Adam had shown that, for all his happy-go-lucky manner, he was a doctor. He had been quick to notice Michael's distracted air and tired eyes, and as quick to advise a treatment.

In this case it took the form of golf.

"Change of scene, change of interest—no time to think about yourself; that's about the best medicine I can prescribe," he had said cheerily, and had promptly carried off his patient, two days running, for a round on the Oldford links, fifteen miles away, where Michael forgot his worries in the vexation of playing an extremely bad game with borrowed clubs, and in his somewhat bitter amusement at the extraordinary curiosity displayed by the retired colonels and Anglo-Indians who made up the bulk of the company in the clubhouse.

Michael had watched them taking each other into corners and saying, as he overheard once: "You know, *the* Carteret, the Judge's son. The fellow who did so well in the Baskam case lately. That's the chap. Breakdown. . . ."

On the third day he had jibbed.

"Afraid I can't manage a round to-day, but you'll find a partner now you know them all," Adam had said after breakfast.

"I'll be hanged if I will," Michael answered laughingly. "I'm going out to shoot for the pot to-day, doctor. I've had enough golf for a bit."

Rafe Adam's eyes twinkled.

"You are better, I think," he answered. "Had a good night, didn't you?"

"Not so bad." Michael grinned sheepishly. It was uncanny the way these doctors seemed to look right into one's mind.

That day he nearly froze in a duck-punt on the harbour with a local "character," a professional wild-fowler named Dan Davis, a simple, knowledgable, bearded old man who found him excellent sport and talked a muddled sort of Socialism in between whiles.

Dan Davis' point of view was, briefly, that all laws were wrong—made by the capitalists to oppress the poor industrious fisherman. He visualized a Utopian State in which all the laws would be made by industrious fishermen to control—not oppress—the capitalist.

He pointed across the dancing waters of Walm Harbour towards Dyke Farm to illustrate a point.

"That's what I mean," he said, "or part of it. There's Dyke—ought to be giving a 'onest living to some poor chap. But what 'appens? Poor men can't afford to take the place, so down comes your rich man, takes the farm, and turns it into a pleasure-'ouse. . . ."

He broke off, apparently disgusted at this enormity of injustice.

Not a bit interested in discussing political economy with Dan Davis, Michael answered that, after all, the new tenant of Dyke was employing labour in renovating the house.

Davis snorted.

"Us fishermen don't 'ave to 'ave no painting and paperhanging unless we does it ourselves. What's 'e want it for? Tell me that."

His eye upon a whisp of teal just beyond Sealey flat, Michael felt unequal to the reply. But for the sake of answering he said:

"Doing the place up, are they? Let's pull over that way and have a look at it."

"Not if I was paid for it," said Dan Davis, as he took the paddles and propelled the punt in the opposite direction.

A few days later Sir Robert Sark turned up unannounced and had a brief but serious talk to Michael.

He was as curt as ever, but he impressed Michael with his uncanny knowledge and care.

"I don't charge for this consultation," he began brusquely, "but Adam told me you'd relapsed, and as you don't seem to be a liar, like most of my patients, I wished, entirely for my own benefit, to see how you were getting on."

Michael was as brusque in his way as Sark was. The specialist raised a strange antipathy in him.

"I dispute your fees no more than I dispute your advice," he said coldly. "What exactly is the position?"

Sark went off into a rough roar of laughter.

"Good Lord, man! I thought at least I could leave the syrup out of the medicine in talking to a man of your intellect. I happen to be interested in curing useful members of society. Your neurotic women are mere 'cases' to me. They don't matter."

Michael felt a little ashamed of his retort; more so when the specialist, after a few searching questions, nodded thoughtfully and murmured, as if to himself: "Most satisfying improvement." Then he turned his flint-grey eyes on the patient.

"It won't do you a lot of harm to spend Christmas with your family if you want to," he said, "but it will do you a lot of good to stay here. Which are you going to choose?"

"Here," Michael replied instantly.

Sark turned away as if entirely pleased. "Good!" he commented. "A serious case cured is, to a doctor, what a weak case won is to a lawyer. You are helping me; I'm grateful."

He walked off without another word, leaving Michael rather like a rebellious schoolboy magnanimously forgiven by his headmaster.

Michael's father had come a few days later, and then Dyke's new tenant turned up at lunch. Michael had talked with intent to him, and he had been puzzled. The man seemed so genuine save for his rather too sleek expression and his particularly easy manner. That facility of conversation did not entirely satisfy Michael's keen perceptive brain.

The problem of Mr. Arthur Ray occupied his mind a good deal, and when, a few days later, Mr. Pell, finding him alone in the lounge, had asked in his prim way: "And what did you think of our new neighbour at Dyke when he was here the other day?" Michael had answered guardedly:

"I'm not quite sure."

"Aren't you?" Mr. Pell replied, as if disappointed. "I think I am. I should like to have a word with you about him very soon."

"By all means. Why not now?"

Michael felt a chill of apprehension.

Curiously enough, the question of Dyke and the smugglers had been avoided, as if by mutual consent, in the past two weeks. Once or twice either he or Mr. Pell had just touched upon the subject, but had dropped it again quickly after an exchange of such futile remarks as: 'We must keep our eyes open,' or, 'Let us hope we have heard the last of that bad business.'

But Michael had not been easy in his mind. There was, as it seemed, a too complete silence from the Grange, and a too obvious light of local interest centred in Dyke and its new tenant. The whole of Salthithe was still talking, with amusement, about the rich Mr. Ray who was going to turn the derelict farm into a 'gentleman's house.'

"No time like the present," Michael went on with a feigned cheerfulness, since Mr. Pell seemed distinctly taken aback by his immediate acquiescence.

The little man smiled ingratiatingly.

"Of course, of course. That's very true, Mr. Carteret. But are you sure you can spare the time?"

As he so often did, Michael felt sorry for this queer, mild-mannered companion of his.

"God bless my soul!" he laughed. "With absolutely nothing to do in the whole twenty-four hours, I'm not so busy as all that. Come along, Mr. Pell; let's go for a short walk and have a chat."

Quite naturally he put out his hand and slapped the little man on the back in a friendly way. Mr. Pell beamed with delight.

"It would be a great pleasure. Would you wait while I get my coat? The wind is very keen; I should advise you to wrap up, Mr. Carteret," he responded.

They walked out through the sleepy town, talking commonplaces, until they struck off from the main road down a farm track which led to the harbour's edge, and then Michael asked abruptly:

"Now, what do you know about Mr. Ray?"

Mr. Pell started.

"Not know, Mr. Carteret," he corrected, "merely surmise. I know nothing *of* Mr. Ray; but I shrewdly suspect that he is not—well, quite genuine."

"Why not?"

"Well, you see"—the little man seemed quite flustered under this direct questioning—"you see, having heard that he was a great sportsman, I felt he would be interested in sea birds. I ventured to introduce the subject. But Mr. Ray, I must say, was perplexingly ignorant. He spoke of shooting seagulls for food!"

Mr. Pell stopped as he made this startling statement, and even Michael felt amazed. But he maintained his pose of cheery interest.

"Then I shall not accept his invitation to dinner," he responded lightly.

Mr. Pell looked hurt.

"There's more behind it than that," he said with reproof.

Michael adopted a more serious manner.

"I know, I know," he said. "It certainly sounds suspicious."

"And the man has foreign ways," said Mr. Pell. with grim disapproval. "He is Frenchified. He shrugs his shoulders and gesticulates. I suspect these foreigners."

The solemn, portentous voice in which Mr. Pell made this announcement tickled Michael vastly. But he was mightily relieved, too. He had feared that Mr. Pell had made some really important discovery that would jeopardize Molly. But now he wanted to laugh, yet he answered very gravely:

"Very unsettling indeed, Mr. Pell. Still, I do not think we can do anything yet. We must keep our eyes open."

"Exactly," said Mr. Pell. "But perhaps you will tell me your impressions?"

"Oh, I don't know," Michael said. "I wasn't impressed by the man. He was too glib; too anxious to please. And a little vague about what made him decide on Dyke of all places."

Michael became interested in his analysis of Mr. Arthur Ray's character. Mr. Pell encouraged his musings in his unobtrusive way, putting in the apt word here and the provocative question there, until, of a sudden, it dawned upon Michael that he was being skilfully cross-questioned.

A little annoyed, he endeavoured to shift the topic of conversation.

"But, after all," he said, with a laugh that excellently disguised a vague suspicion in his heart, "after all, we may be jumping too quickly to conclusions. Let us test our theories, Mr. Pell. Why should we not surprise Mr. Ray by accepting his very indefinite invitation to 'look him up'? Should you and I go and call at Dyke to-morrow, quite casually, do you think?"

"I fear we should not find Mr. Ray at home," Mr. Pell remarked primly. "I happened to meet him only yesterday, and he told me he was going back to London this very morning."

"Then we'll go as soon as he comes back," said Michael, not sorry to defer the suggested visit. Things were getting a little beyond him. And one of those things was Mr. Pell. What was the little man after?

"A very good idea," said Mr. Pell. "As soon as he comes back we'll go."

Michael was glad not to pursue the subject further then, although, subconsciously, he had already decided upon a course of action.

That night after dinner he made a casual remark to

Dr. Adam about the Seymours, and learned that Molly was back.

"I must go and pay my bread-and-butter call for the excellent lunch they gave me," he said innocently.

"Do," the doctor agreed. "Seymour's always glad to see a visitor."

And the next morning Michael booked the local cab to take him over to Street Grange after lunch.

## II.

As he summed up the position, Molly must be given a pretty broad hint.

Mr. Pell evidently was not going to let the matter drop. Michael had very little doubt that the shy bird-man had been pumping him on the previous afternoon. It confirmed an earlier impression, almost forgotten, that their first conversation about this business, on the evening when they walked back after the car broke down, was not as spontaneous as it sounded.

Little Mr. Bernard Pell might merely be a conscientious busybody, or he might be a confederate of the smugglers. In the former case, it was essential for Molly's safety that she should be given the tip that she was suspected; in the latter—well, no harm would be done.

Just a friendly word of advice, he put it to himself, to a girl who was playing with fire; a girl to whom he owed a debt of gratitude. If she didn't care to take it, well——

There was an unusual streak of sheer, naked honesty with himself that would, in times of great perplexity, unexpectedly assert itself in Michael's nature.

"Well, that's her affair; I shall have done all I can do,'' he was thinking when that characteristic trait obtruded.

Would he let it go at that? he found himself speculating. Would he just sit tight and see her trapped? He was not quite clear how the law stood in this matter, but there was something horrible about the thought of Molly in the hands of loutish policemen. That's what it would come to.

Michael Carteret, frowning in a baffled way, announced to a rattling, chattering, antiquated motor-car that he was damned if he knew what he was going to do about it. As he still pondered the worrying problem, they ran down the hill, past a few scattered pantiled cottages, and into the little village of Street.

And standing outside the post-office-cum-grocer-cum-draper's shop, the general store of the place, he caught sight of Molly Seymour herself.

She was talking animatedly to the shopkeeper, the same man who had expressed such pitying superiority for 'one of Dr. Adam's gentlemen,' when Michael had hired a bicycle from him.

Molly held in her hand a big country basket filled with packages. Michael banged on the front window of the Ford and bade the driver pull up.

An alien vehicle in the main street of the village was always an object of interest, and although the ancient Salthithe cab was a comparatively familiar visitor, the eyes of both Molly and the shopkeeper were fixed upon it, as they continued their conversation.

Michael jumped out, and there crossed Molly's face, as she recognized him, a swiftly passing cloud. It was as though his appearance bothered, rather than annoyed, her.

He raised his hat, calling: '' Hallo, Miss Seymour, I was just going over to the Grange.''

She went forward to meet him, but there was no warmth in her welcome as she answered:

"Hallo, Mr. Carteret. I didn't expect to see you."

He was aware of the coldness in her tone, and it made the task he had come to perform seem immeasurably more difficult. He tried to speak lightly.

"Let me take your basket," he said. She surrendered it. "I only just heard you were back, and I wanted to come and pay my respects and—and wish you a merry Christmas and . . ." He was stumbling badly.

Molly relented.

"Well, anyhow, you can give me a lift back to the house," she said more naturally.

She was recovering her self-possession. That first, instinctive, fretted feeling, almost of resentment, that Michael Carteret had already started to make a nuisance of himself by pursuing her, gave way before his obvious embarrassment.

He asked about her visit to London, and she announced, as the cab lurched and groaned over the rough road to the Grange, that it had been 'one stupendous whirl of gaiety.'

She was laughing merrily enough before they reached the house, and she told him, her blue eyes just lighted with a fascinating impudence, as they crunched along the drive:

"You won't find daddy at home, you know, and I don't know if you'll find much tea. Grange visitors are wise to send a warning ahead if they want to be entertained properly."

"I'll remember another time," he said humbly. "And anyhow, I couldn't stay to tea," he lied. "I must get back almost at once."

She looked at him curiously.

"Did you come to see daddy or me?" she asked with an abrupt and disconcerting directness.

The unexpectedness of the question steadied him as some damaging rebuff from an awkward witness so often did when Mr. Michael Carteret was cross-examining. His nervousness left him in an instant.

"Neither," he answered with an engaging smile. "I came to see Peggy on a very urgent matter, and Fate has kindly ordained that I should find her at home."

It was Molly's turn now to be disconcerted.

"What do you want to see Peggy about?" she answered in a lower, and none too steady, voice.

"Shall I tell you here?" he asked.

The cab had stopped by the door of the Grange. Molly was out before he was, and instructing the driver to take her basket round to the kitchen. "And tell Annie to give you some tea," she added. Then, quite casually, she turned to Michael.

"Come and see what last week's gale did to my poor rose-trees," she said. "Most of them are flat."

They wandered across the neglected garden, even more dreary now after days of frost and wind.

"Well?" she asked at last.

"I have a message for Peggy," he said composedly. "It's from the man who owes her such a lot. He has very good reason to believe that—that some people, whom she doesn't suspect, know about her—her wild ways."

Molly's eyes opened wider and fixed themselves searchingly upon his friendly, smiling face.

"He has heard whispers," he went on earnestly, "that the new tenant of Dyke is—how shall he put it?—is suspect, shall he say?

"And particularly"—his voice became very serious

—" most particularly he wants to beg Peggy not to be—wild—again. Because if she is"—there came a tone of appeal that so much impressed juries with a sense of the awful responsibility of their task—" if she is, she may find herself in such horrible trouble as perhaps she has never thought of.

" Will Molly give my message?" he finished simply.

Molly nodded. " Yes," she said with an odd smile, " but I don't suppose Peggy will take much notice of it. She's like that, you know." She laughed rather wistfully.

" But she must," Michael said with some fervour.

Molly looked up sharply.

" Peggy hates the word 'must,'" she answered with a flash of anger.

" But she's going to get herself into a ghastly mess," he persisted anxiously.

Molly's thoughts seemed to have wandered. Her clear, tanned forehead was puckered in thought, her blue eyes were fixed upon some non-existent object on the horizon. Unthinkingly they were walking slowly on; they had left the garden and were now crossing a ridge of shingly waste that stretched away towards the mouth of the harbour.

" Who's been talking?" she asked suddenly, coming back from her reverie.

" Just someone. I mustn't tell tales."

" But who? Who shall I tell Peggy has been—been spying on her? Is it the country people or someone from Dr. Adam's?"

" Tell her someone," he said again. " It doesn't much matter who it is."

Once more they were silent; then Molly returned to the attack.

" What does this interfering someone say about Dyke?" she asked.

He hesitated for a moment; then:

"They suggest that this Mr. Arthur Ray may not be an entire stranger to Peggy, or entirely ignorant of her ways. Are they right?"

"Ask them," she retorted quickly. "They seem to know such a lot."

"I'm sorry that Peggy is going to be difficult," he commented.

They reached the summit of the ridge. Away to the left stretched the open sea, looking so cold and cruel in the winter light. Slow breakers came tumbling in upon the shingle beach, dragging the pebbles with an ominous clatter as they flung back again from the shore to meet the oncoming wave and break its crest into foam.

On the other hand, across the wide expanse of harbour, Salthithe showed up, its church tower black in silhouette against the angry sky.

It was bleak and cheerless; the keen wind from the sea seemed suddenly to blow colder. Molly's short skirts flapped in the breeze, and Michael pulled his coat more closely around him.

Abruptly the girl stopped and faced him.

"Well, what's it all mean?" she demanded in a defiant voice. "We may as well have it out now. Are you, or this vague someone, threatening me?"

He was disconcerted.

"I brought a warning to Peggy," he answered evasively, "a warning I hope to goodness she'll listen to."

"And if she doesn't, you—or someone—will tell, I suppose."

"I had hoped there would be nothing to tell," he said, aware of the touch of contempt in her words.

She flushed as if she had blundered. "Then why all this fuss?" she cried.

He looked at her, standing so straight, so clean, there in the waning light. There was youth and health and frank sincerity written all about her lithe and slender form. It was unthinkable that this splendid girl should be permitted to go her headstrong way, a way which could only finish in the shabby ignominy of the police-courts.

She was meeting his gaze with a fearless challenge that made him feel inferior—feel as though it were he who was being reproved, as if he had done something mean to her. It was an effort to begin, but he meant to speak, and speak frankly.

"I'm going to talk to *you* now," he said suddenly. "Peggy is too wilful," and he tried to smile. "I want to appeal to the Molly who has 'a dear but feckless father with a sort of position to maintain.'" He quoted her own words. "I want her to stop before it is too late. I don't like to think of her as being—dishonest—oh yes it is," as she broke in with a furious protest. "It's stealing even though it is only from the Government. And the law counts it stealing, and punishes it as such."

"It isn't the same thing. It's caddish of you to say that," she interrupted furiously.

"Molly, chuck it, chuck it now. Don't be led into any more of this wild folly," he pleaded. "I don't know who's behind it or what's behind it, but I can guess that it's the fun of the thing that attracts you more than anything else. But it isn't straight fun. And it means absolute ruin in the end—ruin and misery. Tell them, your father, Sophie Vizard, this man Ray, or whoever it is that has persuaded you—tell them that you have finished with it. You can pull out safely now, I think, but if you try again you're almost sure to be caught."

"Who said Sophie had anything to do with it?" she asked, a little frightened, but still angry.

"You have just confirmed my suspicion," he answered quietly.

She stamped her foot. "Oh, I hate you!" she broke out. "I believe you're a spy yourself. You're trying to trap me."

"You know that isn't true," he said.

She looked at him for a moment, then:

"No; I had no right to say that," she admitted candidly.

"Then will you do what I ask?" he begged.

She flung round and faced the grey, mysterious sea.

"I'll promise you nothing," she said. "I don't even admit that you have a right to ask for the promise. It was certainly beastly of you to say what you have said. It's not stealing, whatever your silly law may call it. I'm not a thief. An outlaw, if you like. And why shouldn't I be?"

Her rebellious blue eyes were ablaze with fire as she turned again to face him, her firm and finely shaped mouth tight drawn. She clenched her hands and seemed to hurl defiance at the world.

"And why shouldn't I be?" she asked again with a proud throw back of her head. "I'm at war with your miserable Government. And with every reason, too. What has it done for us—daddy and me. Robbed us of practically everything we owned and loved. Taxed us until we have to live like peasants."

She flung out her hand in a wide and graceful sweep towards the harbour. "A few acres of that, that worthless marsh, is all that is left to daddy now of land that has been Seymour land for hundreds of years. We've had to lose the rest bit by bit because we couldn't pay the mortgages. He's no haggling business man, he is only a rather stupid country gentleman and a brave soldier, and this Government you talk of has never cared for men like that.

" Look at the people who have money nowadays—look at them! Why should we be taxed to poverty on their account. No, every penny I can make out of the Government I count honestly earned. It's just as honest to take it that way as to take it in doles and grants and graft.

" So that's Peggy's answer, Mr. Carteret, and she bids me tell you, too, that she doesn't repent. There's an adventure and a thrill about her life that makes it worth while. She loves it."

The eyes softened into a really merry smile. Michael knew this was no bravado, it was the sheer, frank joy of rebellion.

" And she's no more afraid of policemen and prisons than the original Peggy was," Molly went on with a careless laugh. " And if she ever does get caught she will make a jolly good defence of herself. One that might make the famous Mr. Carteret sit up," she mocked him. " She'll tell the world something of what his precious Government is responsible for."

" Molly, Molly, you mustn't," he broke in, distressed at her reckless speech. " You don't realize what you are doing."

" Oh yes, I do," she taunted. " Only I don't choose to think as I am supposed to think. I'm honest, anyhow, whatever you may say."

" I'm going to stop you, somehow," he said obstinately, stampeded out of his normal calm by her passionate defiance.

" It's easy. Go and tell any policeman. There's one in the village—Jim Barnes. He's known me since I was born. He'll hate the job, but he'll have to do it, of course. Do you think he'll use handcuffs, Mr. Carteret?" She thrust out her slim shapely arms in front of her. " Yes, I suppose so. Daddy and me manacled together. I expect they would drive us over to Langham for the night; there's no cell in Street. But you'd bail us out, wouldn't you? Or don't they allow bail to dangerous smugglers? Go on, Mr. Carteret; I'll be waiting for Barnes at the Grange. I won't run away—I never did yet."

She started to walk, with swift purposeful steps, back towards the house.

He called out in real distress at the scarce hidden bitterness of her mockery.

"Stop! For Heaven's sake, stop!" he said. "You can't know how horribly near the truth you're getting. It's hellish; don't rave on like that, Molly."

She looked over her shoulder bravely, yet unrepentant.

"It will be your doing, not mine, if it comes to that," she said with a little, husky break in her voice. "Do you think the whole village is composed of idiots? It is, in fact; dear, lovable idiots who shut their eyes to things that shock them, and will shut their mouths too, and perjure themselves, to the youngest kiddie. Even the famous Mr. Michael Carteret would have a hard job to get any convicting evidence out of his witnesses. They're slow, old-fashioned folk here in East Suffolk. But they're loyal, true as steel to their traditions. And the Seymours are a tradition down here older than your beastly Governments. They're real old England."

He caught up with her.

"Look here," he said almost in panic. "You're not playing fair. I want to help you, and you're doing your utmost to make it impossible for me. I tell you again, people are talking, people who don't belong to Street or Salthithe——"

"Then shut them up," she said calmly.

"I—I—— How can I——?"

"It's quite easy—for a clever man."

"But—good Lord! Do you realize what you're asking?"

"I? I wouldn't ask you anything. It's Peggy who is asking. She's asking for her reward."

The girl flushed as she spoke, flushed as if with shame. And Michael's face darkened too.

"That's not playing the game," he said in dismay, for he knew now how she had trapped him.

"It's only her request, there's no means of making you agree."

"But, Molly, this is madness. You talk of honesty; how can I be honest and do this?"

"Then don't."

He could find no answer for the moment, and they trudged on swiftly towards the house.

Molly's face was turned from him so that he could not see the emotion that played upon it.

Presently, out of the helplessness of his plight, as he saw it, he said:

"It's taking an unfair advantage."

"Peggy would take any advantage when she's not fighting for herself. She wouldn't care if only she had to suffer."

There was immense bitterness in the tone, and a pathos that touched his heart in the plucky little laugh that preceded her next remark.

"So I will tell her," she said, "that the reward is too big."

The words goaded him into action. In that moment he accepted his obligation.

"You will tell her nothing of the kind," he responded quickly. "You will tell her that she shall have her reward. I will do everything in my power to stop—them—talking. But—and tell her this very seriously—I will do everything in my power to prevent her ever running another cargo."

An expression of relief crossed Molly's worried face.

"Then it's war, Mr. Carteret?" she asked, almost gaily.

"Yes, war."

"All right. It's sporting of you to warn her. Peggy will fight fair this time. But you'll find she'll win."

# CHAPTER VI

## I.

It seemed almost as though Mr. Pell knew that Michael was seeking an opportunity for a quiet talk with him the next day, and wished to avoid it.

In reply to a casual suggestion of a walk in the morning, Mr. Pell excused himself on the grounds of having to write Christmas letters. And at lunch-time his seat at table was vacant.

He had had a scratch meal early, Michael learnt, in order to catch the motor-bus that ran infrequently to Chipping Langham and Ipswich. That omnibus left at half-past one with Mr. Pell unobtrusively huddled up in a corner seat, reading *The Times*. Just before three the badger-haired little man was dismounting outside The Bugle, a fine, old, brick-fronted, coaching inn that looked like the background of a sporting print, and was the most imposing building in Langham's long main street.

Mr. Pell walked briskly along the crowded thoroughfare; a different Mr. Pell somehow, an active, more self-confident, masterful Mr. Pell, out of whose hurrying way idlers instinctively moved.

He swung into a side street by the church and checked his pace, loitering with seeming intent until, as if by chance, he halted before a small shop where tobacco, newspapers, and Christmas cards were displayed in a window made gay with red paper decorations and frosted holly leaves.

Mr. Pell observed that there were several customers in the shop, and he became interested in a string of cheap cards. Then, as the last customer was receiving her change, the old, diffident Mr. Pell entered, with an apologetic smile, and asked mildly for a packet of cigarettes.

A spare, wiry, rather haggard-eyed woman behind the counter watched the retreating customer with an alert gaze. She made no effort to attend immediately to Mr. Pell's request. But, as the street door closed, with just the ghost of friendly recognition in her tired eyes, she lifted the flap of the counter, and Mr. Pell passed swiftly through into a parlour beyond.

And it was as though the whole mantle of the shy, retiring Mr. Pell of The Warren dropped from him as that little parlour door closed.

In his place there was a brisk, energetic Mr. Pell, who nodded cheerfully as he said, "Afternoon, Kennedy," to a plump man of middle age, with the air of a retired manservant, who jumped to his feet and came at once to help Mr. Pell out of his overcoat.

"Good-afternoon to you, sir. I was expecting you'd be coming in some time this week. The compliments of the season, sir," the plump man replied.

Mr. Pell smiled as he ran his hand across his forehead with a gesture which suggested relief.

"Thank ye, Kennedy, thank ye. I wish you and your wife the same. Things all right, eh? Doing better downstairs than up, I expect."

There was nothing diffident about this Mr. Pell. He spoke with the complete assurance of a man in the habit of giving orders with not the slightest doubt that they would be obeyed instantly.

The man Kennedy was deferential.

"You're right, sir, you're right. We've done quite a nice trade down here, seeing that we're newcomers." He laughed in a knowing way, and Mr. Pell smiled as one who understood the joke.

"But Ellen"—he jerked his head towards the shop—"she's not been quite up to the mark lately, sir. It's the cold, I think."

Mr. Pell's eyes grew suddenly thoughtful, but he made no comment.

"Well, let's go up, Kennedy," he replied. "There are several things I want to talk to you about."

"Certainly, sir."

The man led the way up two steep flights of stairs to a room, which he unlocked before he stood aside to let Mr. Pell pass in.

There was a fire burning in the grate, which he poked into a blaze; then he pulled the heavy curtains across the window and turned on the light.

Mr. Pell took an easy chair by the fire and glanced about him. The room was small and snug, and the wall opposite the fireplace was occupied by an elaborate radio set, upon the polished woodwork and the valves of which the firelight played in a cheerful manner.

"Is there anything I can get you, sir?" asked Kennedy attentively.

"Not now. Before I go, perhaps. But sit down. Now, have you anything to report?" said Mr. Pell with the assured air of command.

"Not a thing, sir. The Major did have one game of chess last week. But that was all right; I know by the wave-length. There was a lot of interruptions, and they broke off halfway through. Just said 'Damn' and 'Good-night.'"

"Yes, that's all right. So is the man he plays with. I've checked him; he's an old brother officer of Major Seymour's and a very brilliant scientist. He's done a lot of experimental work in his time."

"Indeed, sir."

"Nothing that might have been Dyke Farm, or anything suspicious from the sea, I suppose?"

"Nothing at all, sir, not since that night. Oh, and I've got all they sent then carefully written out, and I've worried at it for hours. But it's code, sir, and I can't make head nor tail of it."

Mr. Pell frowned.

"We've got to get a sight of their code-book somehow, Kennedy," he said thoughtfully. "Cunning—devilish cunning this chess business."

"It is that, sir."

Mr. Pell asked a few technical questions about the working of the radio set. Kennedy reassured him that certain difficulties had been overcome.

"I'm glad of that," said the little, badger-haired man, whose dark brown eyes looked anything but childlike now. They moved slowly from the fire to Kennedy's attentive face. There was a confident, compelling light in their depths.

"D'ye know, Kennedy," he went on, leaning forward, one elbow on his knee and the forefinger extended to punctuate his words, "I've an idea we'll hear them at work again before very long now. That fellow Ray, who's taken Dyke Farm, as they tell us, he's going to be our warning."

"That would be Holmes, sir, I think you said; the shady City gentleman."

"That's the fellow. He's mixed up with Lady Sophie Vizard. But we'll call him Ray, Kennedy. If I'm not vastly mistaken, they will make that fatal error of playing the same trick twice."

"I don't quite follow, sir." Kennedy's normal masklike face, the face of the well-trained manservant, was now sharp and intelligent.

"Why the same trick again, man. To get the stuff away."

Mr. Pell snapped his words out in a manner that would have amazed his fellow-patients at The Warren, whose butt he was as a stupid, shy, bird-monomaniac.

"Of course." Kennedy's tone showed sudden enlightenment. "When he moves in you mean, sir."

"Exactly. The vans that bring Mr. Ray's furniture will take away the next cargo."

"And when would you expect that, sir?"

"Ah!" Mr. Pell shook his head doubtfully. "That's what I want to know. But I think Mr. Ray's return will tell us."

They discussed the subject from various aspects for some time; then they occupied themselves with the listening set, Mr. Pell testing with assurance of an expert.

He tuned in to a North Country station to hear a rather dreary dissertation upon Christmas customs; a few moments later London gave him the strains of a restaurant band. Then he went abroad and tapped the French and German radios, amused himself for a time translating Morse from ships in the North Sea, then came back and listened carefully for anything local. But there was no response.

"Seems to be working splendidly," he said at length, removing the phones from his ears. "But you'll have to keep watch every night, Kennedy—even Christmas night." He smiled. "But I don't think you'll get any result. Anyhow, let me know anything suspicious."

Kennedy bowed slightly, as if he were acknowledging a demand for another glass of port.

"Certainly, sir," he replied.

Mr. Pell looked at his watch.

"Gad! I must be off in a few minutes," he said. "Now, I think a little glass of something. Open a bottle of the old brown sherry; you and Ellen can finish it up over the holiday, and you can both join me now just to wish you a merry Christmas."

"Certainly, sir," the man repeated, bowing in the same deferential way. "Will you take the wine here, sir, or downstairs?"

"Downstairs, of course." Mr. Pell laughed. "With all your Christmas trade, how can you both be out of the shop at the same time. I said Ellen was to join us."

"I had overlooked that fact, sir," Kennedy apologized, opening the door. "I think you'll find the sherry as you always liked it now, sir. It was a nice little lot I got from a man at Ipswich; just your style. And the cellarage here, sir, though small, is adequate."

"Cellarage be hanged!" said Mr. Pell with amusement. "What do you keep it in, the coal cellar?"

"No, sir, the washhouse. But with a little fire in the copper of nights I manage the temperature fairly well."

"Kennedy," said Mr. Pell in an appreciative voice, "you always were the best butler any man had."

"Thank you, sir," said Kennedy modestly."

## II.

The streets of Chipping Langham were gay and bustling as Mr. Pell made his way back to the Bugle to await the coming of the Salthithe motor-bus.

Langham was old-fashioned enough to keep Christmastide in the old-fashioned way. The provision shops were laden with good things—rows of turkeys and geese, pigs with lemons in their mouths and wreathed with greenery, huge joints of meat, and everywhere holly and ivy.

He elbowed his way through a knot of children gazing in admiration upon a great Christmas-tree, plentifully besprinkled with frost, which almost filled a brilliantly lighted window. Movement along the High Street was difficult in the dense, chattering throng of country-folk ambling along, their arms laden with parcels. For this was Chipping Langham's last market day before Christmas.

Mr. Pell, diffident and self-effacing again, took up his stand outside the Bugle and observed the succession of motor-cars that moved at walking pace and with a continuous hooting of horns. The bus would be late to-night, he realized.

He nodded in his quiet way to one or two of the Salthithe villagers who were waiting near him. Then, suddenly, he caught sight of Michael Carteret coming out of the inn yard.

Michael saw him at the same time and waved his hand.

"You been shopping too?" he asked cheerfully, as he came up to the little man. "Adam was driving in this afternoon, so I took the opportunity to come and buy a few cards. I suppose we shall go back together; the doctor's gone on."

"Yes," said Mr. Pell primly, "I have been making a few purchases."

"Let's stand a bit out of this crowd," Michael suggested, moving back towards the big gateway that led into the Bugle yard. "I've just been in to have a cup of tea while I was waiting."

"What a good idea! I wish I had thought of it," said Mr. Pell.

A loud honking of a motor-horn and a scattering of pedestrians indicated a car turning into the hotel. Michael and Mr. Pell had to retreat down the yard to get out of its way, and they stood by the main entrance, a queer little door with small-paned, bow windows on either side, as a big four-seater drew up.

Mr. Pell's eyes fell upon the driver, a tall, soldierly man with bronzed face and a short-clipped white moustache. Mr. Pell edged into the shadow swiftly, but the motorist had seen him.

"Good Lord, Berkeley! What in Heaven's name brings you here?" he said in amazement, coming forward with outstretched hand and beaming face. "Well I'm hanged! I thought you were never going to leave the East. This is splendid! How are you, my dear fellow?"

Mr. Pell had taken the proffered hand and was speaking warmly.

"I don't know, General. Changed my plans, after all. Decided suddenly I'd like to look at Home again," he answered easily.

And Michael, looking on like a man at a play, heard the other Mr. Pell talking, the crisp, decisive, masterful Mr. Pell, whose name it appeared was Berkeley.

Michael stepped back a pace or two, an expression of incredulous amazement on his face. What game was Mr. Pell playing?

The General was still beaming with delight.

"Wonder of wonders!" he laughed. "To think of old Berkeley come home at last; I never would have believed it."

Michael hugged the wall unobtrusively. He wanted to hear more and not break the thread of the conversation by having to be dragged into it.

Mr. Pell joined in the laughter.

"Hang it all, it's not so astonishing as all that, is it?" he protested, with an assurance that made it seem to Michael Carteret a sheer impossibility that this could be the apologetic, timid, little man he knew, who was talking.

They moved, perhaps by design, a little farther away, and Michael lost the next part of the conversation. But evidently the same cheery raillery was going on. And Mr. Pell's whole manner had changed. He was standing more upright, there was a ring of complete confidence in his laugh.

"Well, look here. Where can I get hold of you?" he heard the General ask at last.

"A letter to the club will always find me. I've made no real plans yet," said Mr. Pell.

"Good. Then we'll dine after Christmas. I'll rake up a few of the old brigade. Gad! How tickled they'll be to hear you're back again."

"Excellent," Mr. Pell replied heartily. "Nothing I'd like better. I may be abroad for a week or two, but I'll let you know."

The General disappeared into the hotel, and Mr. Pell walked slowly towards Michael. There was a curious, questioning smile hovering about the slightly contracted, brown eyes.

"We have just observed the hand of Fate, Carteret," he said without embarrassment. "The hand of Fate," Mr. Pell repeated, "incarnate in General Amberly—you must have heard of him. He's one of our few generals who really can look inside the Oriental mind." He was talking as unperturbably as though there never had been the other Mr. Pell. "A dear good fellow, Bill Amberly. But he's rather forced my hand. Don't you think so?"

Mr. Pell's unruffled manner had an irritating effect upon Michael. It was as though he were laughing at him. And, anyhow, he knew that he had been fooled, badly fooled.

"I'm afraid I don't quite understand," he said a little stiffly.

They had reached the crowded street again, and a lumbering red omnibus was just drawing up outside the inn.

"Our bus," said Mr. Pell laconically. "Obviously I can't enlighten you now. But you're a man of parts, Carteret; I beg you do a little acting for the time being. You'll find it an entertaining amusement."

He chuckled to himself.

They joined the crowd jostling around the cumbrous vehicle, and pushed their way inside.

Mr. Pell was once more timid and apologetic; but Michael caught a gleam of devilment in the mild eyes as the little man announced gravely:

"The black geese are visiting our shores in unusual quantities this year. I rather fancy that portends a hard season."

"Quite," said Michael Carteret, a sudden sense of the magnificent impudence of the whole affair possessing him. His ill-temper vanished. There was something supremely humorous about the way self-effacing Mr. Pell had fooled everybody.

Michael talked geese, intermittently, during the journey back.

But although he seemed to be playing up to Mr. Pell, carelessly, Michael was growing more and more worried. Instinct told him that Mr. Pell was no man with whom to trifle. And he had trifled with him, pitied him, been kind to him, and counted the task of keeping him quiet for Molly's sake, one that would merely require a little tact. And all the time, evidently, this quiet, badger-haired little man had been playing with him.

Michael bit his lip in chagrin as he recalled the confessions he had made, and the guileless way in which he had walked into the trap.

He fell to wondering who Mr. Pell could possibly be. Was he a detective? No; detectives weren't on terms of intimate friendship with distinguished generals. Was he, perhaps, after all, mixed up with the smugglers? Michael found himself hoping that he was; otherwise, if he were hostile to the Seymours, Molly's chances were pretty slight.

Molly, with her queer, wilful charm filled his mind. He was going to save that girl, somehow, despite herself, despite the ominous Mr. Pell.

Mr. Pell's voice at his elbow aroused him.

"Safely back at last, Mr. Carteret," he said primly.

The lumbering bus slowed and lurched to a halt in Salthithe's little square.

"What? Ah yes, of course," said Michael, rising quickly from his seat.

## III.

Dinner that night seemed an interminable function; Michael was aching to get an hour alone with Mr. Pell to find out, if he could, exactly what he had to fight. But Mr. Pell gave him the opportunity as they were sitting over their coffee in the lounge.

"If you could spare a few moments, I could show you those books now," the little man said with a hardly perceptible flash of understanding.

"By all means," Michael answered, rising.

"Then perhaps," said Mr. Pell, "you wouldn't mind coming to my room."

They left the lounge together, Michael aware of the smiles of amusement upon the faces of the other occupants at seeing him caught, as they thought, and doomed to an hour or more of the bird man's dreary talk.

Mr. Pell, almost fluttering, ushered his visitor upstairs.

"I do hope I shan't bother you, Mr. Carteret," he apologized, as they passed the soured Mr. Stacey Archibald coming down.

Michael looked round Mr. Pell's apartment, when they reached it, with keen interest. It was almost a double of his own, a big, airy chamber furnished as a bed-sitting room.

The table was littered with books and journals, mostly about birds. On the chimney-piece a few letters and cards lay carelessly about, addressed to Bernard Pell, Esq. Suspended from hooks on the back of the door were the famous binoculars and Mr. Pell's old oilskin. A cheerful fire burnt in the grate.

Mr. Pell closed the door and, as it seemed, shut on the outside his familiar self, for it was in quite a different manner that he waved his guest to a chair and laughed:

"Well, Carteret, I expect we've got a lot of things to say to one another."

"We have," said Michael grimly.

Mr. Pell took a cigarette from a box on the table and rolled it thoughtfully between his fingers.

"Forgive me if you think I've made a fool of you," he said quietly; "but it was necessary. What you saw this afternoon doesn't really matter; I was going to have this talk with you soon, anyhow. I want your help."

He dropped into a chair.

"My help?" Michael echoed. "What about?"

"This smuggling business at Dyke; the game the Seymours are playing. We may as well put our cards on the table."

Michael started. This was an unwelcome and unexpected blow. But he smiled in a friendly way. He must have all his wits about him if he were to help Molly, he realized.

"Tell me some more," he answered non-committally.

"No. Your move next," said Mr. Pell with a dry laugh.

Michael winced. He was confronted with an as astute a brain as his own here; probably more astute.

"Then tell me who you are and what you're after," he replied after a moment.

Mr. Pell smiled.

"A very brilliant young barrister recently gave me some good advice upon the merits of ignorance," he said. "Let me return it to him."

It was a touch, and Michael acknowledged it with an appreciative nod, as Mr. Pell went on:

"As to what I'm after—that's what I want your help about. My dear Carteret, you and I, knowing what we know, cannot become accessories to a very serious crime. I put it to you, can we?"

A horrible feeling was coming over Michael that he was being driven into a corner by a much cleverer man than himself. And he was so much in the dark. The time for fencing was past. He leaned forward.

"If you will tell me all you care to tell me, I will do the same," he said.

"That's better," said Mr. Pell briskly. "I will."

And in the next half-hour or so Michael heard a story that completely upset all his preconceived ideas. Mr. Pell seemed to know almost everything. Where Michael had guessed and surmised, the little man had facts at his fingers' ends. Quite calmly he told of the wireless between the Grange and Dyke, of Mr. Ray's identity, of how the last cargo of contraband was got away. He spoke of the Seymours' share in the business, of Sophie Vizard's, and finished: "I've been on this affair for months past, Carteret, and the next time they do it, I hope to be ready to act."

Michael was frankly staggered.

"But—but," he stammered, "why have you waited? And what do you want me to do?"

"I have waited," said Mr. Pell, again with that queer smile of knowledge, "to be quite certain of my facts, as that same brilliant lawyer once advised me. And I have waited"—he grew suddenly grave—"because it's not all these small fry—the Seymours and the fisherfolk—that I'm after. It's the—the evil genius behind it all I want. You don't imagine all these local people are organizing a business of this size, do you? They are mere tools. What do you think they're smuggling, Carteret, rum?"

Michael looked sheepish.

"Honestly," he answered, "I'd never given that much thought. I'd supposed it was liquor of some kind with the duty what it is, or saccharine. There are so many things nowadays——"

Mr. Pell broke in with an impatient laugh.

"It's silk mostly, my boy. Frocks and materials for Lady Sophie's shop. Already they must have robbed the Government of thousands, but——"

A look of enlightenment came over Michael's keen face.

"Good Lord! Of course! What a fool I am! Why, the Albion Frock Company——"

"What?"

Mr. Pell was on his feet.

"Lady Sophie's firm. You knew that, didn't you?"

"Are you sure?"

Michael told him what he knew.

Mr. Pell sat down again, thoughtful and stern.

"That's important," he said at length. "It's the missing link in the chain that I've been looking for. So that's how they work it, is it?" He looked up.

"There are some foul people in this world," he added, with a bitterness that startled.

"But I don't understand," said Michael.

"I'll clear up a lot of things for you later," said Mr. Pell. "But, take it from me, this is not the moment. Carteret, you've got to work with me on this. It's no job for the police, they'd blunder, be fooled, send a lot of nonentities to gaol, and never know of that evil genius behind. The Seymour girl, for instance, you wouldn't like to see her in the dock, would you?"

Mr. Pell's keen brown eyes narrowed, and it seemed to Michael that they looked clean into his brain.

"No," he answered positively. "And I tell you this frankly, Mr. Pell, I'll do nothing that will get her into trouble."

Mr. Pell smiled an understanding smile.

"I thought not," he said. "But if I fail, the police will step in, and the Seymours will go down with the rest of the small fry. Not that it would hurt Seymour himself. He's a common fool to get mixed up with business. He's old enough to know better. But Molly——" Mr. Pell appeared almost as though he were musing, talking to himself.

A great sense of relief came over Michael.

"I'll help you all I can on that condition," he said.

Mr. Pell became alert again.

"My dear fellow, it's you who'll have to save her," he responded.

"How do I start?" Michael queried eagerly.

Mr. Pell looked thoughtfully into the dying fire.

"I shall be called away to London quite soon," he said slowly, "but before I go I want to have that code they use." He swung round and faced Michael. "You've got to get it for me, Carteret," he added quietly.

## IV.

When they brought him his early tea the next morning Michael sat up in a dazed, half-awake sort of way, and his first thought was that he had slept the night through, like a log.

It was midnight before he had gone to bed, and he had believed then, and hardly cared, that that night of all nights would leave him wakeful. There was so much to think about; the day had been crammed full of amazing experiences and baffling problems.

Now, as he blinked owlishly at a dull-faced maid who had just drawn up the blinds, the incidents of the night before came crowding back to his mind.

"What's the weather like, Ethel?" he asked mechanically.

"Cold," said the country girl. "'Orrible." She flounced out of the room in an offended way.

Michael ate his thin bread and butter and tried to collect his thoughts.

He felt excited. Mr. Pell's exciting revelations had entirely changed his outlook on life. There was something definite now for which to fight.

But Mr. Pell, the new Mr. Pell, was a puzzle. The man knew so much and told so little, when you came to think it over. As he shaved, Michael tried to assess Mr. Pell, but he had to admit himself defeated.

He even began to wonder why it was that he had so readily agreed to assist in some undefined plan to bring about the undoing of an anonymous, evil somebody.

Over breakfast, at which Mr. Pell did not appear, Michael pondered the matter further, and the more he thought of it, the less satisfied he felt. The mysterious little man undoubtedly held the whip hand. Michael shrugged his shoulders. Added to the task of trying to save Molly from herself was that of saving her from the unknown menace of Mr. Pell. Michael swore mildly as he lit an after-breakfast cigarette. The earlier elation of the morning was passing. Mr. Pell loomed now as a potential enemy.

But there was that code which he had promised to try and secure. What a tangled skein this was in which he had landed himself! How on earth was he to get at that code?

'When in doubt, don't bluff,' was an old axiom of his, and he followed it now. A perfectly open, straightforward reconnaissance of Dyke was demanded first of all.

Mr. Ray, when he had lunched at The Warren, had issued a general invitation to everybody to come and see him. Michael determined to accept it, despite the fact that he knew perfectly well that over-friendly Mr. Ray was not yet in residence at Dyke.

Soon after ten he hired a bicycle at the local shop and set out.

Ethel's ''orrible' day proved to be a keen, clear morning with a bright sun shining on a wintry land cut by a searching east wind. The visibility was perfect—perhaps too perfect, Michael told himself as he coasted down the slope towards the marsh; Dyke could see him a couple of miles away.

Still uncertain as to his plans, he rode his machine along the tortuous flat road, longing for inspiration.

Dyke grew clearer. As he ran down the little dip in the road where the stream crossed it, the place where on that night in the fog he had heard Molly's voice so low and plain, he noticed that the farm had lost much of its shabby appearance. The ragged weeds outside the walls had been cleared, and the gate was new-painted in white.

Michael rang his bell, still determined on his policy of approaching openly, and the angry barking of a dog replied to the sound.

"One guardian, anyway," Michael murmured as he dismounted. "I wonder who else I shall find." And as if in reply to his thought, he heard a call from a field beyond the farm, and, looking, saw two men, one of whom came running towards him.

He waited for the fellow to come up to him. He was a thick-set, puffy man to whom the exertion of running was obviously an unwelcome effort.

"What d'yer want?" he cried, panting, as he came within earshot.

Michael was urbane.

"Sorry to bother you," he called back. "I've just ridden out from Salthithe to see if Mr. Ray had arrived yet."

The man pulled up, red in the face, and blowing hard.

"No, he ain't," he said in a surly voice.

"Ah," said Michael with a bland smile, "I was afraid he had not come down yet. But when we were lunching together at The Warren a few days ago he asked me to come over some time. When do you expect him?"

The man eyed Michael suspiciously.

"That I can't rightly say," he answered, but more civilly. "You see, me and my mate, we couldn't get the job done as soon as he expected."

"A big job, I can guess," Michael laughed. "I saw the house a week or two ago, before Mr. Ray took it. It was in a dreadful state."

"You're right, sir." The man was regaining his breath and his confidence. "It's the waiting about for the stuff to come that takes the time. My mate"—he gave a wave of the hand towards the distant figure that still hesitated in the field—" he's just going over to Holm now to see about the paint. But he won't get it there, not by no means."

"Of course not," Michael agreed.

They chatted on for a few minutes about the loneliness of the place before Michael said:

"But I mustn't keep you if you're going over with your companion. I'll just get you to leave this card for Mr. Ray, if you don't mind."

"I'm not going with him," the man answered quickly. "I got a plastering job to finish. This card, sir; certainly, sir." He eyed it nervously. "Oh, Mr. Carteret. You'd be from the doctor's house. Mr. Ray shall have it, sir."

Michael turned to go.

"Well, a happy Christmas to you both, if you can have it in this desolate spot," he said.

"You're right," the man responded, for the first time in a natural voice. There was a wealth of disgust in his tone.

Michael put his hand in his pocket and produced a couple of half-crowns.

"You and your mate get yourselves a Christmas drink with this," he said genially; "that is, if there's anywhere to get one."

The thick-set man beamed.

"Thank you, sir. We'll try and find somewhere," he said with a knowing leer. "And the compliments of the season to you."

Michael walked his bicycle slowly away. The man had planted himself obstinately in front of the gate with the air of one who was determined to stay there indefinitely. In the far distance his companion was fading from sight across the marshes. Michael jumped impatiently into the saddle.

"And a precious lot of good I've done," he remarked to the chill air as he drove the machine savagely along the deserted road.

But a few moments later a childlike smile broke upon his face. An idea had come to him. He turned and waved his hand at the distant figure, still standing, sentinel-like before the Dyke gate.

"I wonder what time they open in these parts?" he asked himself.

# CHAPTER VII

## I.

A COUPLE of miles across Walm Harbour the windows of Street Grange gleamed in the winter sunshine.

There Sophie Vizard had arrived late the previous evening, but because Molly wanted the counsel of the night to think over what had passed between her and Michael Carteret, she had said nothing until breakfast-time.

Then she had dropped a bomb upon the complacent Lady Sophie and her own unsuspecting father.

"Mr. Carteret came over yesterday," she said quite cheerfully. "He came to warn me that somebody's talking about us, and they've spotted your Mr. Ray, Sophie. Very decent of him, I think, don't you?"

Molly spread a piece of toast thickly with marmalade. Sophie dropped her knife and gasped: "What!"

The Major checked his cup, half raised to his lips, and snapped: "Why wasn't I told before?"

"Because I wanted to think it out," Molly answered unperturbed, nibbling her toast. "There's no need to get excited, but I thought you'd like to know."

"Like to know indeed!" said Sophie, pushing back her chair. "Good heavens, Molly! Can't you ever take anything seriously? Who's talking? What do they say?"

The Major looked suddenly old and tired.

"Do realize what this may mean, my dear," he put in quietly.

Molly ignored Sophie's angry questions.

"I do, daddy," she answered confidently. "I've taken the best steps I can to stop it. Mr. Carteret's dead straight; he's promised not to say a word about the past, but he has threatened to stop us next time."

"Who told him there was to be a next time?" Sophie asked suspiciously.

"I tried to find out," Molly said, with a guileless smile. "But he wouldn't say. That's all that worries me. I can't think who can be talking."

"There are people in Salthithe who may have heard gossip," the Major surmised.

"Or that little fool, Pell—he's always nosing about," said Sophie viciously.

"Anyhow, we don't know; but I wondered what we'd better do," Molly commented, with irritating calmness.

"Tell us exactly what that Carteret man said," Sophie put in peremptorily.

Molly told them. Not all—not of Michael's pleading with her to give up her dangerous game, nor the way she had claimed her reward from him. But the gist of his conversation.

"And he promised to try to stop this talk?" Sophie queried anxiously when the girl had finished. "I'll give you credit for being clever, Molly; but, of course, as we all know, the man's in love with you."

"Aren't you glad of that?" asked Molly blandly.

"Of course. But you could make better use of it if you tried," Sophie answered, nettled at Molly's unmistakable gibe.

"I think I've done rather well," Molly laughed, rising.

"Sophie, we'll have no more of that," said the Major with annoyance. "I don't like this bickering; the position is far too serious."

Molly began to gather together the plates and cups. "Go on, gilded staff," she said cheerily, "go and work it out for yourselves. I've got to clear the table."

But when they had gone, the careless smile gave place to a look of dull anxiety. Molly had spent a miserable and unhappy night. It was easy enough to laugh at Michael Carteret and declare war on him, but that war was going to be a nerve-racking business. As Molly judged men, Michael was one who meant what he said, and she knew that she was afraid of him.

And Sophie's insinuations hurt, too. It was beastly to have it suggested that you should exploit a decent man's gratitude. And the worst of it was she had done it—in her despair. For once there did not seem so much fun in this smuggling game.

Molly frowned as she went about her work, and deliberately delayed going to her father and Sophie in the little sitting-room. But she had to go at last.

The Major stood by the window, the worried look still on his face; Sophie, her narrow lips tight drawn, was huddled up with outspread hands before the log fire. Molly forced a gaiety she was far from feeling.

"Well, gilded staff, fixed it all?" she asked, plumping down upon a shabby sofa.

"Sophie thinks she'd better—go to town about it," the Major said gravely.

Lady Sophie swung round from the fire.

"He ought to have got that interfering Carteret man out of here when I first warned him," she said petulantly. "We'd have had none of this trouble if he had listened to me."

"I don't mind," said Molly with an ingenuous smile; "I told you I'd be glad enough to have him a hundred miles away next time."

"When do you think you can get hold of—of him, Sophie?" the Major asked anxiously.

"Certainly not till after Christmas. I might telephone; not from here, but from Ipswich, if I drove over."

Molly wandered to the window.

"But, for Heaven's sake, see that Carteret does keep his mouth shut, Molly," Sophie went on.

"Oh, he's all right," Molly replied over her shoulder.

The telephone rang, and she went across the room to answer it.

"What? Yes. When? Right, thank you." She hung up the receiver and turned, with a curious smile, to Sophie.

"About Mr. Carteret," she said quietly. "It was Joe Mallet, the ferryman, speaking from Davis' house. He says he has just taken Mr. Carteret over with a bicycle, and he's started out along the Dyke road. I sent word to Joe to watch him yesterday."

"Well, what's that mean?" Sophie's voice was harsh and anxious.

"That I'd better go across and see what he's up to," Molly answered calmly. "I'll try to be back for lunch, daddy."

## II.

A mile from Dyke the road makes a sharp right-angle turn and bridges a broad drain that crosses the saltings and discharges into a little inlet from the harbour.

Lost in thought, Michael did not notice, until he had almost reached it, a figure that sat on the low rail fence that bordered the bridge.

When he did see it, he gave a cry of astonishment, for it was Molly, Molly clad in her short serge skirt and blue, fisherman's jersey, with high gum-boots, and a dark, woollen cap pulled tightly over her rebellious hair.

"How's the war getting on, Mr. Carteret?" she called mockingly. "I'm afraid you didn't get much encouragement at Dyke, did you?"

He felt amazingly foolish, but he spurred himself to put up a good fight.

"Good-morning, Peggy," he said in the frankest of tones. "This is a pleasure I didn't expect." He swung himself from the bicycle. "The war? Oh, that's going fine. But what are you doing here?"

She laughed in that alluring, husky way of hers.

"Just come to see how the enemy was getting on," she answered.

"But how did you know I was here?" he asked without thinking.

"Ah!" she said, shaking her head. "That's telling. I happened to be taking a little sail and I caught sight of you, perhaps. That do?"

Michael knew that she was ragging him, and it gave him a nasty, uneasy feeling to realize that, without doubt, he was spied on. But he answered in her own gay manner.

"A most reasonable and simple explanation," he said.

Her blue eyes danced.

"And so I thought I'd come ashore and wish you a happy Christmas," she added.

He took a seat on the rail beside her and offered her a cigarette.

"That's very chivalrous indeed of the enemy," he laughed, lighting a match.

The next few minutes were awkward ones. He and Molly talked in a stilted way of the weather and other trivial things far removed from their real thoughts.

It seemed to Michael that Molly was trying to make up her mind to tell him something. For his part, he was debating how far it would be wise to hint to her the much more serious turn things had taken since he had left her yesterday afternoon.

After all, he admitted to himself, his only interest was to get this girl out of danger; Mr. Pell's vague scheme of vengeance against a nebulous person was not his affair.

Presently Molly broke the silence, nervously and obviously unsure of herself.

"Mr. Carteret," she began, "I've been thinking things over. You ought to go away from here."

"Oh, come!" he laughed. "That's too easy. And, besides, I'm here for a cure."

She did not echo his laughter.

"How ill are you?" she asked suddenly.

"I don't know," he answered, a little confused by the seriousness of her question. "I'm better, a lot better. Insomnia was the worst of it, and I've got over that—down here, at any rate."

"Then go and finish your cure in Switzerland or Cornwall or anywhere but here. I want you to."

"I'm not surprised," he answered stiffly.

But Molly was really distressed.

"It isn't just that," she said, "but I've got you, or you've got yourself, into a rather nasty hole. I know you'll fight fair—that's why. But suppose—suppose we should get into trouble—how will you come out of it?"

Michael didn't like that question, and he hedged.

"I'm going to try and stop you getting into trouble," he replied defensively.

"But you can't do it," she persisted; "that is, without telling on us. You know that. And I don't believe you'd tell. But if somebody else did—you would seem to be mixed up in it—and—well, it wouldn't do you any good, Mr. Carteret, would it?"

There was truth and logic in what she said, and Michael saw it. His position was extraordinarily weak.

"It's kind and generous of you to say this," he answered, "but my sole object is to try and save you from the inevitable smash."

"Why?" she asked, meeting his gaze fearlessly.

"To pay a debt," he said.

"Then pay it by going away."

"The debt's to myself," he replied, "the other one is already cancelled."

Molly's wind-tanned face darkened.

"Then, if anything goes wrong, it's your own responsibility?"

"Entirely. I take my chances as you take yours."

"I think you're very foolish."

"Maybe," he said quietly; "but it's in your power to make me wise."

"So you're trying to shift the responsibility so soon," she retorted scornfully.

"No; merely to indicate the remedy. Peggy—isn't it worth while making two people wise—Molly and me? Why don't you chuck it all? You can see the danger of it. Or is there something behind it that I don't know—or perhaps you don't know?"

She looked up, startled.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Is there anybody—forcing—you to do this?" he queried gravely.

She jumped to the ground, lightly and gracefully.

"I don't let people force me to do anything," she replied with defiance. "Not even by threatening to harm themselves. I've given you a hint, Mr. Carteret; I was grateful for the hint you gave me. And

I like to pay my debts to myself, too. So I've paid it. But I tell you this straight, if you go on interfering in things that don't concern you, you will certainly get yourself into trouble and possibly me, too."

Despite her rough, unconventional garb, she looked amazingly beautiful, her sensitive face alight with indignation.

"So it looks like stalemate," he sighed, climbing in turn from the fence.

Her eyes fixed on him sharply.

"If you go on playing with fire you'll certainly get yourself into trouble and probably me. Queer how things turn out in life, isn't it, Peggy?"

She laughed bitterly now.

"Right you are. Then we're both on the road to ruin. I'm sorry, but I didn't choose it. Let the fight go on. Good-bye, Mr. Carteret."

She waved her hand, then jumped, easily, the roadside ditch, and struck off across the saltings towards the harbour.

Michael leaned on the fence and watched her swinging along over treacherous marsh, so full of confidence and health.

She was a curious girl, her own worst enemy surely, for she could have none other. A mood of depression stole over him; the task upon which he had embarked seemed so hopeless, just a vicious circle, out of which he was helpless to withdraw.

Molly's shoulders, then her head, were lost behind a distant bank of reeds, and presently a boat appeared close in shore, heading towards Street. He could just recognize Molly at the tiller. It was admirable the way she handled the craft, sailing close into the wind and getting every inch out of her.

Michael sighed. Molly Seymour had come, by chance, to take a part in his life bigger than any woman had ever played before. He wanted to be her friend, but Fate had made them enemies. Was there nothing he could do to counter Fate?

Fascinated, he watched the dark sail grow smaller in the distance until at last it was lost, blended in the black mass of the trees around Street, then he jumped on to his bicycle once more. He could see no way out of it—unless Mr. Pell could help. Mr. Pell now loomed as a potential friend rather than as a potential enemy. What on earth was that man after? Michael asked himself again and again on his ride home.

## III.

Mr. Pell chanced to be sunning himself in the boatman's shelter when the taciturn Joe Mallet landed Michael on the Salthithe side of the Walm.

"You've been for a ride, I see," said Mr. Pell brightly, as Michael lifted his bicycle from the boat.

"Yes, only as far as Dyke Farm," Michael answered openly. "It's cold, but very jolly."

The ferryman secured his boat and lounged up to his cottage a few yards away.

Mr. Pell motioned to Michael to take a seat beside him.

"I guessed where you had gone," he said in an undertone. "I thought I would come and meet you. Any news?"

"No and yes."

Michael looked thoughtfully at the swift running tide. He would keep Molly out of this conversation for the time being at any rate, he decided.

"No," he went on, "insomuch as I was greeted by a barking dog and a suspicious person who made it quite clear that I was unwelcome. Yes, because I think the same suspicious person and his pal are human enough to prefer the comfort of some neighbouring inn to the lonely duties of watching Dyke. If I'd been ten minutes later, I believe I'd have found only the dog in possession." He outlined what had occurred. "Now, the point is," he concluded, "where's their nearest pub?"

Mr. Pell puckered his brow.

"The map should tell us that," he said, "but as I remember it's the best part of three miles away, at least—six by road. There's the—the Punch, I think it's called, on the outskirts of Holm. A solitary place, but I dare say cosy enough. I was there soon after I came down."

"If only we could be sure," said Michael intently.

"We will be," Mr. Pell replied with certainty. "You mean, if we can get those two chaps over there and keep 'em there——"

"Exactly. With a piece of steak to keep the dog quiet, I'll go through Dyke in an hour."

Mr. Pell rose. "It's a good scheme, Carteret," he said. "Now, let me see," he smiled, "we'll do it at once. I'll go and have a word with Adam before lunch. This means that I have decided suddenly that I can't stand Christmas at The Warren. I hope Adam won't mind, but I feel I must spend a day or two with—with my niece—my married niece, I think, Carteret."

The brown eyes twinkled with mischief, so unfamiliar in the mild brown eyes of the other Mr. Pell.

The little man fumbled in his pocket and produced a camera.

"I'm going to take your photograph for identification purposes—no, don't be alarmed," he said, as a puzzled, suspicious look crossed Michael's face. "Pose for me will you, out here, against the shelter."

Quite at a loss to understand, Michael obeyed, but he was vastly entertained at the way the shy Mr. Pell now fussed and fretted to get everything "just right."

"Now," said Mr. Pell when at last he had finished, "you escape from me. Go on ahead; I'll follow later."

Michael affected boredom as he nodded a good-bye and wheeled his bicycle away.

From behind the curtains of his cottage Joe Mallet watched the whole incident with bewildered eye. Mr. Pell settled down in the shelter once more and fiddled with his camera.

When Michael came down to lunch it was to find Mr. Pell already finishing his meal. The little man's agitation suggested a frightened hen. He twittered, kept looking at his watch and glancing nervously over his shoulder 'to see if the cab had come yet.'

"You'll find a note in your room," he murmured between timid protestations that he was sure he was going to miss the train, and he left, with a jerky bow to the room and a prim, stilted expression of hope that they would enjoy 'a very pleasant and happy Yuletide,' even before the first course was served.

"Poor Mr. Pell," said Rafe Adam genially, as the local car drove off. "I hope his married niece is possessed of great patience. He's suddenly decided to spend Christmas with her. That makes our party smaller still." He laughed in his boisterous, cheerful way.

"Let's hope she's interested in birds," Mr. Stacey Archibald put in sourly.

An unfriendly titter went through the room.

Michael made his escape as soon as possible and went upstairs.

On the chimney-piece, inconspicuous, but where no letter had been when he had come down to lunch, was an envelope addressed in a round clerkly hand: 'Michael Carteret, Esq.'

He tore it open eagerly.

"Plans necessarily uncertain," he read, "but will advise you. Stroll about the village to-morrow morning and pay attention to anyone who may ask you the way."

"Now, what the devil does that mean?" Michael asked himself as he tore up the note and cast it on to the fire.

## IV.

The local Ford deposited Mr. Pell at Chipping Langham Station so long before the London train was due that the little man, naturally enough, put his suitcase in the cloakroom and went to kill time by a walk in the town.

And that walk led his sauntering steps up the little side street by the church and into a small tobacconist's shop with the name 'Kennedy' painted over the window.

The shop was empty when he entered, and he quickly passed behind the counter to the parlour behind.

"Ellen," he said to the tired-eyed woman, as the door closed, "I've come to spend Christmas with you both."

An expression of genuine pleasure flooded the nervous face.

"Why, sir, I'm sure you're very welcome," she answered. "We will try to do what we can——"

"It won't be the first time," Mr. Pell interrupted, "but I'm afraid I'll have to rob you of Kennedy to-night. Where is he—upstairs?"

"Yes, sir. In the—the room."

"I'll go up," said Mr. Pell casually.

In that snug room at the top of the house, with its most efficient radio installation and its heavy curtains, Mr. Pell briefly outlined his instructions to Kennedy while the man dealt with a roll of films his master passed across to him, in a daylight developing tank.

When the long strip of celluloid was fixing, Kennedy washed his hands and got out a large-scale map of the district.

"That would be the most likely one, sir," he said, putting his finger on the word "inn," marked on a lonely road that meandered some couple of miles or so behind Dyke to a huddle of cottages down on the seashore.

"That would be the Punch at Holm—the Suffolk Punch, sir. Perhaps you've come across it."

Mr. Pell nodded.

"There's a footpath leading from the farm straight to it," Kennedy went on.

"That's our spot," said Mr. Pell.

"I'd better get over at once on the motor-bicycle," Kennedy said. "The houses open at half-past five, and those men are likely to be there early rather than late."

"See that the hood's fixed to the side-car," Mr. Pell rapped out.

"Certainly, sir."

Mr. Pell walked across the room and pulled the film gingerly from its bath.

"They are going to be all right," he said, examining them with expert eyes. "These are the two fellows. Do you know, Kennedy, I had to lay out in the grass four hours to get those pictures and this." He pointed to an amazingly fine negative of a pair of wild duck. "Wonderful things these new telescopic lenses!" He laughed appreciatively.

"Indeed, sir. So I should judge," said Kennedy with deference.

Mr. Pell let the film drop back into the hypo.

"The last two," he went on, "are of Mr. Carteret. You'll need to make yourself very familiar with him. There may be times when you will have to decide quickly on his identity. His is a very characteristic figure with a rolling sort of walk. He has a way of growing suddenly interested in his tone of voice—a lawyer's habit, Kennedy—and . . ."

Mr. Pell went on for some minutes with a detailed analysis of Michael Carteret's various personal peculiarities. There was no trick of voice or gesture that seemed to have escaped him.

Kennedy listened with keen intent, absorbing every word.

"I think I've got the gentleman all right, sir," he said at last.

"Good. Now you go and get the bicycle ready, and I'll wash these films and make some prints wet. Where's the spirit?"

"On the third shelf, sir."

Mr. Pell busied himself with the photographs with the confidence of long experience, and, when Kennedy returned, three limp but rapidly drying prints were ready for him, and the room reeked of methylated spirit.

"Here you are," he said; "those are the two men, and that's Mr. Carteret, in case you should see him. And now, Kennedy, one more thing. There's an answer to a question about playing chess."

Kennedy looked uncomprehending but alert.

"It's only a surmise of mine, but I think I am right. I think it's a sort of password among those people mixed up in this business. I'd like to know it. Only if you're quite sure the opportunity is ripe, raise the point. Ask one of the men if he plays chess, and see what happens."

"Very good, sir. Will that be all?"

Again it might have been the perfect manservant receiving his final orders before retiring for the night.

"All, thank you," said Mr. Pell. "Good luck, Kennedy."

"Thank you, sir."

Mr. Pell turned to the listening set and picked up the head-phones while his fingers played deftly with the variometer, and in a few minutes the sudden chugging of a motor-bicycle in the street below indicated that Kennedy had started on his journey to the Suffolk Punch.

After a while, the little man wandered into the only other room on that floor, where a camp bed, a chest of drawers, an armchair, and a washhand-stand took up most of the available space. But it was spotlessly clean, and a bright fire burnt in the tiny grate. This was his own room, for use when he needed it. In a leisurely manner he changed into an old suit of tweeds, then went back to the wireless room, and sat for an hour or more, thinking, in the flickering firelight.

# CHAPTER VIII

## I.

THE last customer had been served, and 'Kennedy, Tobacconist and Stationer' was closed for Christmas.

Mr. Pell waited a few minutes after he heard the roller shutter of the shop rattle down before he descended to the parlour. A savoury smell of cooking came from the distant kitchen, and already Ellen was at work setting the table.

"Now, now," said Mr. Pell kindly as he came into the room; "don't bother about all this, Ellen, you must be tired out after your Christmas rush, eh? Anything will do for me—a slice of cold meat, a bit of bread and cheese——"

"Oh no, sir," the woman said almost reprovingly. "Kennedy wouldn't allow that. He sent up a sole for you from the fishmonger's. It will be quite soon ready, sir."

"Come, that's too bad," Mr. Pell replied. "He shouldn't have done it, Ellen. Why, you look worn out."

"Oh, I'm all right, sir. It's just the rush and—and this cold weather." She shivered. "Somehow I don't seem able to get used to it. You must find it hard yourself, sir, sometimes, after all those years in a hot country."

"At times, Ellen, at times," Mr. Pell said thoughtfully. He was watching her discreetly, and the shadow of a frown clouded the brown eyes.

The woman was not unaware of his scrutiny, and she grew ill at ease.

"No return of the old trouble, I hope," said Mr. Pell sharply.

"Oh no, sir, oh no. Never. Not a bit. Don't you worry about that, sir." She turned to go.

"I should if there were," said Mr. Pell enigmatically, "and I should soon spot it, Ellen."

But Ellen had gone, as though she had not heard him, and presently she returned with the splendid, plump sole, grilled perfectly, and served in a manner that few restaurants could equal.

Mr. Pell did not revert to the question of the 'old trouble.' Instead he chatted easily, as he ate his meal, of the shop and its trade, of how Ellen and her husband spent their brief leisure time.

Ellen admitted frankly that Chipping Langham was dull, and agreed, sheepishly, when Mr. Pell suggested:

"I expect you go into Ipswich to the pictures whenever you get a chance."

"Kennedy's always laughing at me about that, sir," she confessed. "Will you have your port here, sir, or upstairs?"

"So Kennedy remembered the port, did he? Good fellow. I'll take it up, Ellen; no, you go and have your own supper and go to bed, my girl. You've done quite enough for to-day," as the woman started for the door with the tray.

She consented reluctantly, and Mr. Pell climbed the steep stairs to the top floor.

"Don't wait up for your husband," he called; "he might not be back to-night."

Mr. Pell spent half an hour appreciatively over his port, then pulled up a comfortable chair to the wireless set and spent the next couple of hours listening to Europe, or the greater part of it, in intervals of keen search for any local radio conversation that might be going on.

But the Major was not playing chess to-night.

Just before eleven, footsteps on the stairs told Mr. Pell that Kennedy had returned. He took off the head-phones and went to the door.

Kennedy came in, his face red with the night wind, but suave and imperturbable as ever.

"I think I may say, sir, that we can manage that little affair to-morrow," he announced impassively.

"Splendid," said Mr. Pell, waving a hand towards the port decanter. "Have a drink, Kennedy; you look as if you needed one."

"On the contrary, sir, if you would excuse me. I've worked pretty hard with those two men to-night, sir, and the liquor at the Punch isn't perhaps all it might be."

Mr. Pell gave a hearty laugh.

"Oh, it's like that, is it, Kennedy?" he said. "They were—not adverse—to a free drink or two."

"They were not, sir," Kennedy replied, with some slight show of emotion.

"Now, tell me all about it," said Mr. Pell.

Kennedy's story was brief and lucid. As he had informed the company at the inn, he was Mr. Smith, a small shopkeeper from London, on his way to spend Christmas with a married sister at Lowestoft. And he had lost himself, never having been on that road before.

"I did make it appear, sir, that I'd been having a little refreshment on the way," he explained.

"Excellent," Mr. Pell commented.

And the motor-cycle had broken down close by the Suffolk Punch. Naturally enough, Mr. Smith had gone into the inn to make inquiries. Being a free-handed and genial man on holiday bent, he had soon got into friendly conversation with the handful of yokels in the Punch's taproom. And among the party, as Michael had suspected, were the men from Dyke.

"I had to have a spare part for the bicycle, sir," Kennedy concluded, "so I left the machine at the Punch, and they told me in the taproom I might get a lift in here from Holm, and I got it on an Ipswich van. To-morrow morning I go back—with the spare part—to collect the machine, and I think our two men will be there at opening time to meet me. If I may say so, sir, I made myself very agreeable to them. Cockneys they are, and very suspicious until they've had a few."

"Any luck about the chess question?"

"It was not the occasion, sir,"

"All right. I think you've done very well, Kennedy."

Mr. Pell's voice was brisk, his commendation sincere.

"You'd better get off to bed, there'll be nothing to worry about here to-night."

"Thank you, sir. Your tea at what hour?" asked Kennedy, rising.

"Eight o'clock will do; we'll make our plans then."

"Thank you, sir. Would that be all?"

"It would," said Mr. Pell with an amused twinkle.

## II.

Michael Carteret developed unsuspected archæological tastes the next morning and decided to inspect Salthithe Castle. The ruin stood a little way back from the village square, a view of which it commanded easily.

It was going to be a queer Christmas Day, he decided, for he had an instinctive conviction that

Mr. Pell was going to cause something to happen before the sun went down in the frosty sky.

Most of the inmates of The Warren trooped off to church at eleven o'clock. Rafe Adam appeared after breakfast in breeches and stockings, announcing that he was off for a long walk to prepare for the evening dinner. Michael said he thought he would do the same later on.

When the church bells ceased their gay peal, Michael was inspecting a mouldering Norman arch and filled with a strange sense of elation. Every new figure that appeared in the village street he regarded as a possible messenger from the mysterious little man whose baffling plans he was now practically committed to assist.

At a quarter-past eleven, a shabby looking motor-van crawled in from the Langham road, chugged uneasily, and stopped suddenly. The driver swung himself impatiently from his seat and went to the engine.

Michael strolled from the castle slopes and passed casually by.

While the driver was cranking up a stubborn engine, his companion called out:

"Can we get to Holm this way, mister?"

Michael nodded as he went across to him.

"Holm? Yes. Go straight through here and past the bridge. You can't miss it."

The driver, goggled and wrapped in a heavy, ragged, old overcoat, stopped in the middle of a swing and spat on his hands.

"Walk along that way and we'll pick you up, Carteret," he said quietly.

Mr. Pell was speaking.

It was a real effort to appear unconcerned. Michael felt that the eyes of the whole street were upon him.

The chauffeur, who was that amazing Mr. Pell, gave another swing of the starting-handle. Two village children toddled from a near cottage, neglecting for the moment their Christmas toys, to gaze at the familiar sight of a broken-down motor-car.

"Thank yer, mister. Straight ahead?" the man on the driver's seat called out.

"Straight on," said Michael, recovering his wits. He turned, with a good show of indifference, and sauntered on, past the castle grounds, in the direction in which the car was to follow.

At the bend in the road he looked back, casually. Mr. Pell, still in front of the van, appeared to be engaged in a noisy conversation with his companion. The two gaping children had been joined by three more, and several villagers had come to their front door to observe the motor-van's troubles.

Michael grinned. The impudence of the whole incident was delightful.

He was well out into the open country, with lonely, bracken-clad Holm Common on his left, and bare fields, from which even the usual sheep were absent, on his right, before the sound of a motor-engine reached his ears.

Once more he looked round. And once more that engine coughed, spluttered, seemed to hesitate, then raced noisily to the accompaniment of grinding gears. The van just passed him before it stopped dead.

Then the flapping tarpaulins at the back opened, and Mr. Pell's brisk voice called:

"Jump in quick."

Michael jumped.

"Right you are, Kennedy."

The stubborn, halting vehicle suddenly reformed, and purred along the road with never a suggestion of engine trouble.

"Splendid," said Mr. Pell with satisfaction. "You couldn't have timed it better, Carteret."

Michael sat himself on the floor on a piece of sacking, and asked with a puzzled smile:

"And what on earth have you let me in for now?"

"An amusing and possibly exciting few hours," said Mr. Pell blandly.

"What, Dyke?" Michael queried in swift excitement.

"If you're game," said Mr. Pell.

"I'm game enough."

"But what about lunch? Are they expecting you back at The Warren?"

"No; that is, if I don't turn up no one will wonder."

Mr. Pell pushed his goggles on to his forehead and stretched out his legs, the brown eyes fixed keenly upon Michael's expectant face.

"Good," he commented. "Now, listen to me, Carteret. We've got the chance of a lifetime here."

The van bumped and jolted over the stony, little-used road as Mr. Pell outlined his scheme.

When they reached the Suffolk Punch, Michael was to remain in the van. Mr. Pell, as a local driver from Chipping Langham, would naturally enough go into the inn to have a drink with Mr. Smith, of London, whom he had obliged, this Christmas morning, by driving him over with his spare part for the motor-bicycle.

If the two men from Dyke turned up, as soon as all seemed clear, Mr. Pell would leave.

"I shall drive a bit farther along the road to turn," said Mr. Pell, "and that's your chance. Have a look at this map presently; I've marked your route. I'll turn just over the brow of the rise, they'll never see you from the Punch, and you'll pick up the footpath in about half a mile."

Michael frowned as he concentrated on his instructions.

"Sounds all right," he said after a few moments. "But there is the dog."

Mr. Pell stretched out his hand and grabbed a flabby parcel.

"A pound of best English meat, Carteret, mildly doctored. Our canine friend will enjoy it and sleep for at least a couple of hours afterwards," Mr. Pell replied. His eyes wrinkled in a queer way. "Drugs, as well as birds, have been my hobby," he added with an unexpected gravity.

The next moment the van slowed down and the front flaps opened slightly.

"If I may suggest, sir, this would be the moment for you to take the wheel," Michael heard a suave and deferential voice say.

Mr. Pell scrambled to his feet as the van stopped.

"Now, you've got it all?" he said, dismounting.

"I think I'm clear," Michael answered.

Mr. Pell fastened the back tarpaulins, and Michael, spying through a chink, saw, presently, the quiet village of Holm, and then a quaint weather-boarded old house, in front of which hung the sign of a preposterous cart-horse, and beneath: 'The Suffolk Punch. J. Bigott. Proprietor.'

The van moved twenty yards beyond the house to where the narrow road contracted yet more.

"Well, yer'll come in an' 'ave one," said Mr. Pell's companion in raucous Cockney tones.

"I don't mind if I do," said a voice that might have been Joe Mallet's or Dan Davis', though it came from the lips of Mr. Pell.

## III.

Time passed with painful slowness within that draughty, darkened van. Michael studied his map, a large-scale one, with his route carefully marked in red ink. But the light was poor and it was not easy to read.

Every now and again voices sounded close beside him as country folk passed by, and once in a while, as the door of the inn opened, the laughter of the festive inmates of the taproom came for a moment to his ears to die away again as the door closed.

He was cold and cramped, and although his watch told him little more than half an hour had elapsed since Mr. Pell had gone, it seemed double that time.

This adventure, which an hour earlier had filled him with elation, now appeared a hopeless and tiresome one. What chance had he of finding this code of which Mr. Pell spoke so confidentially? There might not even be a code there; and, anyhow, it would surely be carefully hidden. But, hidden or not, it was a needle-in-a-haystack task to search the whole of a rambling farmhouse.

And, again, why was he doing it? How would this help Molly? Nervous and impatient, Michael grew resentful of Mr. Pell's knowledge and his secrecy. As likely as not the cunning little man was merely making use of him for his own ends.

But what an enigma he was! And this fellow who was with him—the man who spoke one moment like a Cockney and the next as a respectful—what? Like a respectful butler, that's what it was.

Automatically Michael lit a cigarette; then, a minute later, put it out hurriedly, realizing that the scent of his favourite Turkish tobacco and the smoke that must seep out of the covered van would probably attract the attention of any passer-by.

This inaction was growing unendurable. He crawled to his knees and peered out at the back. The Suffolk Punch looked irritatingly cosy in the wintry haze.

The door opened, a burst of chatter and laughter came to him, and, to his immense relief, he saw that Mr. Pell had just come out.

The little man, looking so absolutely like the shabby van-driver he professed to be, walked very slowly along the road, and started up his engine with a clumsy deliberation.

He made one ineffectual attempt to turn, then drove on a couple of hundred yards to where the narrow road widened, and swung the vehicle round, backing it almost into the hedge. And that useful engine stopped once more.

Mr. Pell was out of his seat in a flash and round to the back of the van.

"All clear, Carteret," he said in a crisp, commanding voice. "You should have a good three hours—possibly more. When I left Kennedy he was arranging with the landlord to have dinner, and he was so popular with our two friends from Dyke that they were ready to join him. Poor Kennedy! He'll have a dreadful head after this, but nothing to what his two guests will have."

Mr. Pell chuckled.

Michael emerged from his captivity and stretched his cramped limbs. Those forebodings of so short a time ago had gone now that the moment for action had come. And Mr. Pell inspired confidence.

"I'll need all of three hours," he said.

"You'll probably have twelve," Mr. Pell replied dryly. "But don't count on it."

"I won't," Michael agreed.

"Now then," said Mr. Pell in that same sharp, confident way, "you've got the map, the Christmas dinner for the faithful watchdog, and you'd better take this torch. Make your way home as you think fit, but Kennedy will try to be at the cross-road beyond Juke's Farm—it's marked on the map—from four till five. He's going to lose his way and have a breakdown there. If you can get there he'll run you in in his side-car. If anything should go wrong—well, you will have to use your wits. But I can tell you this: Those two men won't have many wits to use by then.

"That's all right," Michael answered with a confidence he did not altogether feel. "I'll manage it somehow. But you'll keep in touch with me? If I get any news, I mean."

Mr. Pell pondered for a moment.

"I'll telephone you about ten to-night," he said. "I'll be your old friend—who shall we say?"

"Joyce."

"Joyce, then. I'll just ring up with Christmas wishes. If you have any big news, say you were going to write to me; if there is nothing to report, thank me for my letter."

"Right. I follow."

"And now, my dear fellow, good luck," said Mr. Pell. "And—and believe me, the best way to save that charming Miss Molly from what she probably thoroughly deserves, is to get that code."

Michael could feel himself flushing.

"I wish I knew what the devil you are really after," he said suddenly.

"After a devil," said Mr. Pell in a hard voice, "and a code."

Michael scrambled over the fence.

"I've got to trust you," he said, still uneasy, "so I'd better get off."

"A very sane conclusion," Mr. Pell commented. "Good hunting."

Michael struck off across the field in the direction marked on the map. The inn was hidden by the slight rise in the ground, and already the thick air was growing more misty. He looked round and waved a hand.

Mr. Pell, busy once more with that obliging engine, responded.

Michael strode on, feeling suddenly very lonely, and with a thrill in his heart that took his mind back to a winter afternoon eight years ago when, astray from his flight, four miles over the German lines, he had turned to fight his way back alone in the face of half a dozen Hun machines that had appeared, as if by magic, out of the Flanders mist.

It seemed then that he could never do it, but he had. It seemed now that he could never do it, but he would.

## IV.

Ten minutes' hard walking brought him to the footpath; another thirty minutes to where a vague blur in the distance, backed by an indistinct sparkling background, where the winter sun fought for mastery with the cold mist as it shone upon the waters of Walm Harbour, told him that he was in sight of Dyke.

The solitude was extraordinary. Neither sheep nor cattle nor human being was to be seen. The air was still and heavy, and the whole world, it seemed, within doors.

Dyke grew less indistinct. Michael's nerves were a-tingle. A bunch of hooded crows feeding a few yards from the path got up suddenly with flapping wings and sent his heart beating faster.

Presently came that for which he had waited, and it came with relief—a short yelp followed quickly by a protesting, warning series of barks from the one faithful guardian of the farm.

Or was the dog the only guardian? Those men wouldn't be such fools as to leave the place absolutely alone. Dyke looked ominous. From every window, surely, eyes were peering at him. But whose eyes?

He strode on, openly but apprehensive. A short silence, then a sudden angry snarl, and the dog had leapt the gate and was coming towards him, menacing and dangerous.

Michael took his flabby parcel and untied it. If Mr. Pell's doctored steak failed there was going to be an exciting time ahead, for the dog was a powerful wolflike beast, a crossed Alsatian with cruel fangs and an uncompromising air of hostility.

"Good boy," said Michael, and laughed at the futility of the words.

The 'good boy' came intently towards him, growling fiercely. Michael hurled his package at the oncoming cur. The beast stopped, sniffed it suspiciously, then began ravenously to devour it.

Michael made a little détour for safety's sake, and glanced furtively behind him to see, with relief, the animal still engaged at its meal.

Then he vaulted a bar gate and crossed the deserted farmyard.

There was a great change in that yard now; the crop of weeds and grass had been cleared, and a black patch of ash on the cobble-stones showed where they had been burned. Doors and windows had been repaired and painted, and the place was littered with planks and ladders and all the paraphernalia of the house-painter.

Michael tried the back door and found it locked, as were the ground-floor windows. But an upper window was half open, and by the aid of a ladder he was soon able to enter the house.

In an access of caution he hurried downstairs and unbarred the front door, then went round to the back and removed the ladder. Now, if he were surprised by the men from the inn, at least he had a way of retreat available on the side opposite that from which they would approach.

"I shouldn't make a bad burglar," he told himself with a grin as he re-entered the farm.

Inside, the change he had observed in the yard was even more noticeable. That air of rot and decay, so predominant when first he had entered Dyke, had given way now to a spruce cleanliness. The house felt warm and smelt of turpentine and distemper.

But it was very still; still with that silence that accentuates every sound. From somewhere there came a regular tapping noise. He stopped dead. What did that mean?

A second later he smiled with relief. A clock, of course! These fellows lived here, and, naturally, they would need a clock.

He went in the direction of the sound and came to the kitchen, where a cheap and noisy alarum clock ticked vigorously on a deal table.

Here were all the signs of habitation. Remains of breakfast littered the room. An uncleaned frying-pan, thick with bacon fat, lay in the hearth by an oil cooking-stove, still alight and throwing out a welcome heat. Dirty plates and mugs surrounded the clock, and papers were strewn untidily on the floor.

Michael moved into the adjoining scullery.

Here evidently the men slept, for a couple of camp beds, unmade, stood by the near wall.

But there was something else that drew his attention. On a deal box by the window stood a two-valve listening set, and, fallen on the floor beside it, a dirty copy of the current *Radio Times*, opened at the previous night's programme.

Struck by a sudden thought, he began carefully to examine how the wire led in. It was curious, as he realized then, that he had never noticed any aerial round about Dyke.

A sharp, creaking noise brought his head round swiftly, every nerve alert. Then that strange rustling noise he remembered having heard before. But it ceased, and once more he told himself that a scampering rat was the cause of the alarm.

But the noise increased the eerie sense of danger, and he moved more furtively, constantly glancing over his shoulder.

Michael began a systematic exploration of the house, and found nothing save newly painted woodwork and newly papered rooms. Mr. Ray's men were certainly doing their job well; there was absolutely nothing suspicious about the place.

Yet it seemed to creak and whisper mystery at each step.

Again and again he went to the back to scan keenly the field path to Holm. But the country was utterly deserted, misty, cold, and alone. And from the front the haze now blotted out the distant shore. Even the birds, it appeared, were still.

He had banked his greatest hope upon finding something up in the little attic room, and when he reached its door his heart beat quicker.

Gently he opened it, but the room was bare now;

no sign of its former snugness remained. A feeling of defeat came over him. All his trouble had been wasted, and he would have to return to Mr. Pell with a tale of failure.

A queer whistle broke the silence, a mournful wailing sound, repeated quickly and dying away, like a plover's call.

Michael jumped, his heart hammering away in alarm. Could he have been mistaken? Was it only a plover, or was it—a signal?

Motionless, he stood listening, and now it seemed that he could hear muffled footsteps and the sound of someone moving outside. But he could not be sure, and he dared not approach the window to spy.

One, two, three minutes passed, still he was afraid to move. And then the cry came again, eerie and lonely.

There was no doubt about it this time; that was no bird's call. He looked about him frantically. He would be trapped.

On tiptoe he crossed to the passage.

Someone was knocking gently but rhythmically at a door, three taps in quick succession, then three more with a longer interval between them.

For an instant the thought flashed into his mind that this might possibly be Mr. Pell or his companion come to warn him of some change of plan, but that hope died quickly as he heard a man's voice calling hoarsely: "Healy! Healy, are you there?"

That settled it. Whoever this newcomer was, he had come to see the men.

Michael looked about him in panic now. Racking his brain for some means of escape, or some scheme for hiding, he had an uneasy feeling at the back of his mind that there was something familiar about that voice. There was a note in it that he had heard before, yet he could not place where.

Was it Major Seymour? It might be. Or was it Ray himself? Spoken in the loud, whispering note of one who calls furtively, it was hard to identify the tone.

Michael realized that he must act and act quickly. He must decide at once whether to remain where he was and trust that the unknown, if he entered, would not adventure as far as the attics, or, while the stranger was yet outside, to make a bolt for it from the front door, chancing to luck not to be seen.

He determined on the second course.

Swiftly as he dared, for the stairs seemed to groan and creak as he sped down them, he made for the front door. If needs be, he would cut straight down towards the harbour and hide there till darkness came on.

The door opened easily, and an anxious glance up and down showed him the way still clear. Michael hugged the wall ready to make a wild dash at the corner for the clump of trees that bordered the path down to the hardway. At the angle of the house he hesitated just for a moment.

Then, as he crouched to make that final sprint, there was a noise behind.

He tried to turn, but as he did so, something sprang upon his back, and he fell sideways, his head crashing against the wall of the house.

And when Michael Carteret regained consciousness he was in his own bed at The Warren, and Rafe Adam with grave and anxious face was standing by his side.

## V.

It was night time, and although his head was throbbing and his mind an indefinite and muddled uncertainty, Michael tried to smile.

"Good Lord, doctor! What—what's happened?" he asked weakly.

Adam's gravity relaxed with obvious relief.

"You've had a bit of an accident," he said quietly, "but you are getting on nicely now. Your job, my dear fellow, is to go to sleep and not to worry."

Michael had little desire then to worry or argue. He was vaguely aware that his head was swathed in bandages, but he was tremendously weary.

Adam lifted him gently from the pillow and gave him a dose.

"Now, happy dreams," he said with a smile. "In the morning you'll be ever so much better; I'll tell you about it then."

And the morrow seemed to come almost immediately afterwards, a morrow with a wintry sun shining feebly in at the window, and Rafe Adam again at his side, brisk and cheerful now, saying:

"A sore head and a gummy tongue, eh, Carteret? Well, well, the worst is over. But you thank your lucky stars that you've got a sturdy cranium. My hat! but you did take a toss." He laughed cheerfully.

Michael's head did feel sore and his mouth gummy, but otherwise he felt fairly fit. He blinked his eyes sleepily as he sat up.

"What in Heaven's name is all this about?" he asked stupidly. "I remember——"

Suddenly it began to come back to him—his adventure at Dyke, the alarm, his stealthy escape, and that unexpected attack that ended in oblivion. Fear and suspicion filled his mind.

"I remember—I remember——" He halted. "Something——" He forced a smile of bewilderment. "What did happen, doctor?" he asked innocently.

Adam drew a chair up to the bedside.

"Do you know you were nearly killed by that brute of a dog Ray keeps at Dyke?" he said.

"Dog?" Michael echoed vaguely.

"Yes, a thing like a wolf. I'm going to take steps to have the brute destroyed," Adam replied indignantly. "I can tell you it's a lucky thing for you I turned up when I did. The beast had you down and out. It ought to be in a menagerie, not loose on the peaceful countryside. A scandalous business!"

Michael was just plainly dazed.

"The dog did it?" he asked incredulously.

"Sprang at you from behind," said Adam; "chucked you down, smashing your head against the wall, and then stood over you, and, 'pon my soul, I thought the brute was going for your throat."

"But how did you see this?"

Rafe Adam laughed in his genial way.

"Act of Providence, I suppose, Carteret. I was chosen to be the instrument of preserving a valuable life for the State. No, no, my dear fellow, not quite so dramatic as all that; I just happened to be there at the time, and for the life of me I can't understand why the beast didn't attack me."

Michael put his hand to his head.

"I'm all muddled. Please tell me what happened," he said.

"Why just this," the doctor replied with a reassuring smile. "I'd been for a long walk out beyond Holm and round by the coast there. I was coming back by Dyke, and I thought I would look in and see what our rich neighbour-to-be, Mr. Ray, was doing with the old place. But there was nobody there, and I wandered round the house, peeping in at windows and so on, and all of a sudden I heard a growl and a scuffle and I saw that infernal dog get you down, and I had the dickens of a time to get him off you."

"I—I'm devilish grateful to you," Michael responded, still bewildered.

"Not a bit," said Adam. "That wasn't the worst of it; it was getting you back here that worried me."

"Yes, of course. How did you manage?"

"Like Mr. Pickwick on that famous occasion—in a wheelbarrow part of the way."

The doctor seemed tremendously tickled. "There was nothing else for it, Carteret," he said. "Then just along by the cross-road that leads up to Juke's farm I happened on a lost Cockney motor-cyclist. We returned in triumph, you unconscious in the side-car, and I perched on behind the good Samaritan. It shocked him, I can tell you. He looked as if he thought I had murdered you and was trying to get rid of the body."

Michael smiled feebly. His brain was still terribly jumbled. That motor-cyclist—could it have been Mr. Pell's companion? And did Adam wonder why he should have been prowling round Dyke?

"I'm afraid I feel rather stupid still," he said at last, "but I must say I'm awfully grateful to you, doctor."

"Oh, nonsense! I'm only too glad to find you're better. But you must go slow for a day or two. No getting up yet, Carteret."

"I don't want to," said Michael weakly.

"Well, don't let that worry you. I'll come and have a look at your cracked head later on, but I think that's going on all right. Just take it easy. And, by the way, a pal of yours called Joyce rang you up from London last night with Christmas greetings. I told him you were a bit seedy, and he was most distressed. He said he'd ring up again to-day. Can I give him any message."

Michael made a big effort.

"What, old Joyce?" he said. "The sound fellow! Tell him the patient's going on nicely and thank him for his letter, will you?"

# CHAPTER IX

## I.

London had returned to work in that half-hearted manner that pervades business life in the first few days after the Christmas holidays, but Madame England's establishment in Dover Street remained closed.

As the delicately written sign on the door informed callers, the atelier of Madame England would reopen on January 1st.

Lady Sophie Vizard eyed that dainty notice, and frowned at the sooty appearance a few days of London weather had given it, as she let herself into her own shop on a bleak, raw morning.

Sophie looked old and tired, and a worried frown gave to her grey-green eyes a petulant expression.

The luxurious salon was in semi-darkness; chairs and settees were swathed in dustcloths which gave a ghostly effect.

Sophie hurried through, with an involuntary shiver, to her private room and turned on the light. It was cold and dreary. She set a match to the fire and sat huddled in her rich furs as she cursorily went through a mass of correspondence piled neatly on her table.

Presently she rang, and a caretaker appeared.

"There will be two callers this morning," Sophie said in an abstracted way, her eyes still upon her letters; "Mr. Holmes and a Mrs. Lebrun, or some name like that. Anyhow, she will bring a letter. I'll see them, but nobody else. Do you understand?"

"Quite, madame."

"All right. Mr. Holmes should be here in a few minutes."

Sophie continued her affairs until the sharp summons of the street bell foretold the arrival of Mr. Derek Holmes, otherwise Mr. Ray.

Derek Holmes entered, rubbing his hands and smiling in that rather too friendly manner of his. He placed his grey felt hat on a sofa and got out of a heavy, fur-lined coat.

"Well, Sophie; things all right?" he asked, plumping down by the fire.

"No—rotten," said Sophie, getting up in search of a cigarette. "We've had to make all sorts of changes in plan."

Derek Holmes looked peevish. His loose mouth half opened, and his fishy eyes fixed on Sophie.

"I say, they haven't got on to me, have they?" he asked indignantly.

"You! Good Lord, no, Derek! They've forgotten all about you. But things aren't going smoothly. There's a hitch, and he's not a bit pleased about it." Sophie flung a match viciously into the grate. "You won't be affected; you carry on just as before. You had better get down to Dyke at once—to-morrow at the latest, and make yourself a familiar object of the seashore." She smiled in a hard, cynical way.

Derek Holmes moved uneasily.

"I say, I wish you'd tell me a bit more," he said.

"There's nothing to tell," she replied. "All you have to do is to live the life of an open-handed sportsman. Go shooting about the harbour from a motor-boat we've provided for you; apologize to Mr. Carteret, a patient at The Warren, for a dog of yours that attacked him, and generally make yourself loved by all. That is easy enough, isn't it?"

The look of indignation on Derek Holmes' face gave place to one of bewilderment.

"What dog? What motor-boat?" he asked stupidly.

Sophie laughed. It pleased her to bully and irritate this normally self-satisfied man. She regained some of her own good humour.

"I'll tell you," she said, drawing up on the other side of the hearth, and for half an hour she talked earnestly, enlightening Dyke Farm's new tenant upon a number of things.

"Yes," said Holmes at last, "it sounds all right as you put it. But I don't like it, Sophie, I tell you that."

"You're always telling me that," she said impatiently. "But it doesn't matter two rows of pins whether you like it or not. So why argue about it? Tell me about this new manageress you've sent over. Is she safe?"

Holmes accepted Sophie's final dismissal of the previous subject with a dissatisfied shrug.

"Yes; perfectly," he answered. "Where are you going to put her?"

"Ipswich."

"Why? What's happened to Violette?"

"Lost her nerve. Grew sentimental. So she's gone back to Lille."

"No trouble likely to occur? She couldn't be behind this hitch at Salthithe?" he asked anxiously.

"Oh no. She was glad enough to go without getting into trouble herself. But the Lebrun, that's the woman's name, isn't it?"

He nodded.

"You're perfectly sure she can be trusted?"

"Absolutely. I know too much about her," he answered with an oily laugh. "Marie Lebrun will do anything, if she's paid for it. As a matter of fact, she's not too popular in Paris just now. There was a little affair she'll be glad enough to let blow over before she goes back. There was an American in it, and the Consul's kicking up a row. Marie's far too wise to quarrel with me."

Sophie's face hardened with satisfaction; there was a flinty cruelty about her tight lips which accentuated her haggard expression.

"Sometimes I think the game's not worth the candle," she said with a harassed sigh.

"It pays a damned good dividend, though," Holmes commented with a dry laugh.

She nodded, and stared into the fire.

"You told this woman to be here at twelve, didn't you?" she queried at length.

He agreed.

"Do you want to see her?"

"No, no. I'll leave her to you now. She knows quite definitely what's expected of her. It's up to you to engage her or not."

"Oh, I'll engage her," Sophie said with a nervous shake of her head. "But she'll be here soon, so you'd better get off, Derek."

"Right." He put on his coat and stood for a second or two, before a mirror, fixing the collar just so. "What about a bite of lunch later on, Sophie? Meet me at the Boulevard grill-room at one?"

"I might," said Sophie casually. "Don't wait after half-past. But I shan't want to meet any of your friends, Derek."

He winced, then ignored the snub and tried to placate her.

"Of course not. Just you and me. I'll put you up a first-class lunch and you look a bit not quiteish, eh?"

"I'll think about it," Sophie replied, with a curt nod of farewell.

## II.

"Mrs. Lebrun" was announced ten minutes later.

"Tell her to come in," Sophie said sharply to the caretaker.

She sat back in her desk chair and eyed the woman who entered with an appraising glance, as though she were not a human being but just a piece of furniture which was being paraded for her inspection.

Marie Lebrun, dark, keen-faced, with a finely modelled but rather aquiline nose, and big, respectfully suspicious eyes, endured the inspection with no apparent sign of embarrassment.

An appreciable time elapsed before Sophie replied to the woman's courteous "Bon jour, madame." Then it was in French that she said:

"Yes, you have a good appearance. But do you think you can undertake the work I have for you?"

"Perfectly, madame."

Marie Lebrun stood almost motionless in front of Sophie's table.

"You understand that your payment is almost entirely on commission?"

"That is understood, madame."

"I am generous when I am well served," Sophie said coldly. "I am impatient of failure. Your predecessor failed me."

The Frenchwoman made a little gesture of understanding. "Naturally," she murmured.

"Sit down," Sophie ordered suddenly.

The woman obeyed, like an automaton, sitting bolt upright upon the edge of her chair.

"I am engaging you entirely upon the recommendation of my buyer, Mr. Holmes," Sophie went on, her hard eyes fixed upon Marie Lebrun's impassive face. "He tells me he knows a good deal about you." There was just the suspicion of threat in the tone. "That you are a good business woman and discreet. I do not wish my connection with the Albion Frock Company known. I don't profess that the fact is an absolute secret, but the more people who know it, the worse it is for my custom here."

"Assuredly, madame."

"Let me hear you speak English," Sophie commanded, changing to that tongue. "Have you worked in this country?"

"Oh yes; I was here for two years during the war."

The Frenchwoman's command of the language was good and her accent attractive. "I worked with"—she mentioned two famous firms of modistes—"and I have also been in America."

Sophie nodded approval.

"You should do very well," she said. "Now, I will give you a little advice. Your custom will be largely——"

She began a careful and businesslike survey of the type of customer most likely to shop at the Ipswich branch of the Albion Frock Company. She impressed upon her new employée that any credit she gave was done at her own risk. "Not that I imagine you'll be such a fool as not to give credit sometimes. But you give it; the company doesn't; remember that," Sophie interpolated in a matter-of-fact way.

"As Mr. Holmes has probably told you, I dislike sidelines, although I realize that they have some value in attracting custom. I raise no objection to your selling cosmetiques, so long as they are good preparations, but that must not interfere with your work for the company."

A sort of veil seemed to fall across the keen brown eyes as Marie Lebrun bowed stiffly and answered :

" I will have great care of that, madame. It is but complexion powders and suchlike, but I find, always, that the ladies like to have such things straight from Paris. Indeed, it does help the greater trade."

" Perhaps."

Sophie smiled indulgently.

" Well, then, we will try you for a month," she said, rising. " I will telephone Mr. Pares—he will be your bookkeeper and secretary. He is a most responsible man, but he knows nothing of the—art and finesse of our business, Madame Lebrun. He has been in charge since the late manageress left. You will find him stupid, but honest. Worry him with nothing but accounts; he knows his position."

The Frenchwoman had risen instantly as Sophie moved from her chair.

" And to whom am I responsible, madame?" she asked, for the first time with real expression in her voice.

" To me," said Sophie meaningly, " so far as the company is concerned. Mr. Pares will tell you how I like the confidential reports made. Good-day."

Marie Lebrun bowed herself out respectfully, and Sophie sat brooding in front of the fire for some time. Then she rang for the caretaker.

" I'm going now," she said. " I shall perhaps come in to-morrow. See that everything is all right and that the fire is laid."

She went out into the street and looked up and down in search of an empty taxi. It was drizzling, and she felt nervous and uncertain. She might as well lunch with Derek, it would be better than being alone.

A gentle voice at her side broke into her thoughts.

"Dear me, if it isn't Lady Sophie. Really, this is a most pleasant surprise."

Sophie turned her head sharply.

Mr. Pell was smiling up into her face. He wore a shabby old raincoat, and was peculiarly awkward as he lowered his umbrella and removed his hat.

"What, Mr. Pell!" said Sophie with a swiftly feigned geniality. "Why on earth are you in London?"

Mr. Pell beamed.

"I thought it would surprise you," he said. "I've been spending Christmas with a married niece in Kensington. I have, in fact, just come from there—by the Tube."

He waved a hand in the direction of the station in a manner that indicated that he had done something rather original and daring.

Sophie smiled at the simplicity of the little man.

"I'm sure it must be a relief after The Warren," she replied.

"Indeed it is, though I fear I must be getting back there soon. Dr. Adam, you know, will be annoyed."

"I should let him be," Sophie said in a new, more friendly voice. A quick light of decision showed in her eyes for a second. "Mr. Pell, this is an occasion," she went on with her old careless manner. "Now, you mustn't refuse a woman's whim, even an old and faded one like me."

"Oh no," protested Mr. Pell gallantly.

"I'm going to take you to lunch," said Sophie gaily.

"What, me? Lady Sophie, this is indeed a pleasure. But let me be the host."

Sophie shook her finger at him playfully.

"Mr. Pell, do what you're told," she said with mock gravity.

"If you command, Lady Sophie, who am I to refuse?" Mr. Pell announced with an old-fashioned bow.

### III.

Mr. Pell had a distinct advantage over Lady Sophie during that lunch, for he knew so much about her and she knew so little of him.

Yet both in their respective taxi-cabs afterwards—she speeding westward and he towards the City—were puzzled.

Why did she ask me to lunch? was the question Mr. Pell asked himself.

Is that little man the simple fool he seems to be, or is he an interfering, inquisitive nuisance who has stirred up Michael Carteret? Sophie wondered.

And to neither question did a satisfactory answer arise, though Mr. Pell was very certain that Sophie had tried to get something out of him, while Sophie tried to convince herself that it was nerves, and nerves only, that caused her vague fears.

Mr. Pell stopped his cab by the Gaiety Theatre, and went across the road to Somerset House, where he occupied himself with looking up details of the Albion Frock Company, its shareholders and directors. The result was not illuminating. Sophie's name did not appear, nor did any he could recognize.

He made voluminous notes, and continued his journey eastward to Liverpool Street Station Hotel.

Here Mr. Pell made two long-distance telephone calls—one to The Warren, the other to a Chipping Langham number.

The Warren came through first, and to Rafe Adam Mr. Pell made a halting and apologetic explanation that he was delaying his return for a day or two because, as he said pedantically:

"My niece is having a family party, at which it is felt I should be present."

"Of course. Quite," Adam responded. "I can understand, and a little change won't do you any harm, Mr. Pell; I give that as an opinion."

"You relieve me greatly," said Mr. Pell mildly. "And you are all well, I trust, at The Warren?"

"All except poor Mr. Carteret. He had a bit of an accident." Adam told in a sketchy way of Michael's mishap.

"But you don't mean to say Mr. Carteret is still in bed?" said Mr. Pell in a shocked voice.

The doctor made light of it.

"He's not quite fit yet," he answered, "but we hope to have him all right again soon."

"Do please convey to him my very deep sympathy," Mr. Pell begged anxiously.

While he waited for Chipping Langham to come through, Mr. Pell sat deep in thought.

He had heard Kennedy's account of how Adam had commandeered him to take the unconscious Michael back to Salthithe, and he had received one very scrappy note from him, addressed to Richard Joyce at the hotel, in which Michael told vaguely of an extraordinary attack by the dog and a complete failure to secure any information from Dyke.

Mr. Pell was worried. Michael should have been better than Adam suggested he was. And—there were many things about this incident that did not please Mr. Pell.

When he spoke to Kennedy across the telephone wire a little later, he gave some crisp instructions, and finished:

"I'll telephone you from Nottingham to-morrow. Let me know all you can by then."

Mr. Pell slept at Leicester that night. He spent some considerable time in observing the Albion Frock Company's branch in that city the next morning. At Nottingham, later in the day, he resumed his interest in the same firm's shop in that town.

Just before the shop closed, Mr. Pell even went so far as to adventure into it. It was almost empty at the time, and impatient assistants had already begun to tidy up for the night. Mr. Pell caused a good deal of amusement among those giggling young ladies by the blunt way in which he explained, to a suave, foreign manageress, his desire to make a present of a frock to his daughter-in-law.

Mr. Pell adopted a rough-and-ready manner.

"I'm not fool enough to choose a woman's dress for her," he stated frankly, "but if I send her here to choose one for herself, what's it going to cost me?"

Madame, with patience, explained that frocks varied in price.

"Could she get a decent thing for a fiver?"

Something quite charming, madame told him, with a convincing gesture.

Mr. Pell pondered, while his eyes roamed round the shop. That, he said at last, was what he thought he would do. He was a ready-money man, he stated; he would think it over and return in the morning with the cash.

The manageress was certain that the lady would be more than satisfied.

"Monsieur is a business man," she said. "Monsieur will understand that a firm like ours, dealing on such a big scale, can charge—oh, so much less for material and labour. As for design, let madame's taste judge of that."

She smiled attractively, throwing up her hands with a pretty, quick movement that expressed at once admiration of the gentleman and complete certainty of his daughter-in-law's taste.

Mr. Pell said:

"Well, well. I don't understand these fripperies, but you talk sense when you say you can cut down charges by a big turnover. Good-night, miss."

Five minutes later, when Mr. Pell returned for the umbrella he had negligently left behind him, he startled a late customer hurrying from the shop and aroused further giggles in the assistants, waiting with anxious eyes on the clock for the moment of their release.

Mr. Pell spoke again with Kennedy that night, and was far from satisfied with what he heard.

"From what I learn, sir, Mr. Carteret's really bad," said Kennedy.

"I shall come back," said Mr. Pell. "Communicate in future in the usual way, and unless I hear from you I shall be looking in in a day or two."

"Very good, sir. Will that be all?" Kennedy asked in his expressionless tone.

"All, thank you," said Mr. Pell, hanging up.

From Nottingham to Ipswich is a long, tiresome, cross-country journey, but Mr. Pell was in the Suffolk town by lunch-time.

In the early afternoon he wandered slowly by the Albion Frock Company's branch, a big shop in one of the main streets. He was the timid, diffident Mr. Pell now, and he fluttered uncertainly by the doorway, glancing up at the name over the door, then across the street, and eventually he entered.

A smartly dressed assistant, with amused wonder in her eyes, came forward to meet him.

"I—I'm very sorry to trouble you," Mr. Pell faltered, "but surely Mr. Billing the bookseller used to occupy these premises."

"Not for some time; he's been gone a year or more."

"Really," said Mr. Pell. "Could you tell me where he has moved to?"

"I'm afraid I don't know. Sorry," the young woman answered.

"I wonder," Mr. Pell asked with an apologetic smile, "I wonder if you would be so very kind as to inquire for me if any of you know Mr. Billing's address."

"I'll ask."

The superior young lady moved languidly to the back of the shop.

"Joan, d'you know where Billing the bookseller is now?" she demanded in a bored way of another black-clad, superior young lady.

"Sorry. I don't know," said the second superior young lady, without interest.

A quiet, keen-faced woman, with dark eyes and an aquiline nose, appeared silently from an inner room.

"What is it?" she asked with a strong French accent.

The first young lady explained.

Without seeming aware of the keen-faced woman's existence, Mr. Pell eyed her carefully. He recognized her. She was the woman he had seen enter Madame England's in Dover Street a couple of days before.

"Pray do not bother," said Mr. Pell with a diffident cough. "I will inquire of the post-office."

Madame Lebrun faded silently into her room.

The superior young lady once more expressed her sorrow.

Mr. Pell shuffled into the street and made his way, thoughtfully, back to the station.

## IV.

Rafe Adam's early optimism regarding Michael Carteret's convalescence was not fulfilled. The wound healed easily enough, but Michael seemed to be suffering from shock.

He was sleeping fairly well, but the old depression was back upon him. A great lassitude possessed him; he was reluctant to make any effort, mental or physical.

Hour after hour, each day, he lay in the bed half dozing, filled with gloomy thoughts, and with hardly enough energy even to wonder what was happening at Dyke or the Grange, and was rather glad that Mr. Pell remained away.

Sometimes, in the morning, something of his old keenness of spirit would return, and Dr. Adam, sitting by his bedside, would prophesy convincingly that he would be 'up to-morrow.' But as the day wore on the former lethargy would return.

Michael had received one letter from Mr. Pell, which sandwiched in with conventional phrases of sympathy a clear message that all was well and that he was not to worry. That came on one of Michael's better mornings, and the transient suspicion, never entirely banished from his mind, strengthened.

Was it conceivable that the mysterious little man was in league with the smugglers? He had been so sure about the safety of that dog! It would be a monstrous deceit to have led him into the trap at Dyke in order to injure him.

No. In a weary way Michael put the thought from him. He would not imagine Mr. Pell acting such a dastard's part.

On the morning that Mr. Pell was journeying from

Nottingham to Ipswich, Rafe Adam had seemed graver than usual when he came to dress the cut.

Michael asked with a dispirited grin: "Aren't I ever going to get up again?"

With brisk professionalism the doctor reassured him.

"Only a matter of time, and a short time," he said. "But I'm not at all sure I shan't send for Sark. Not that I worry about you, my dear chap, but I think a little change might do you good; a week in town even, if he'll agree. You've got down in the dumps; that's what it is as much as anything. And I don't wonder."

He laughed, understandingly, as he dabbed gently about the wound.

"Anyhow, here's one improvement. This won't want dressing any more. A couple of bits of plaster for a day or two, and that's the end of that."

Michael took the doctor's comment much to heart. 'Down in the dumps' was the phrase. Perhaps there was much truth in that; he hadn't made any great effort to get well. He must try harder.

Later that morning he crawled from bed and took a little exercise up and down the room. He did feel better; at any rate, more hopeful. Then, wrapped in a dressing-gown and a couple of blankets, he sat by the open window and looked out across the distant harbour.

The keen, salt air felt good to his starved lungs, and the sight of an occasional boat, nosing her way up against the tide, set him thinking of Molly, and gave him a new desire to be well and active again.

Though he was tired, he regarded the arrival of his luncheon tray with a greater interest.

The grilled sole did not seem nearly enough, and the milk pudding he positively gulped. It was the first meal he had enjoyed for days, and he fell to wondering whether he dare ask for an egg at tea-time.

He looked at the regular dose of tonic with disgust, and after a moment, with a gleam of schoolboy mischief, he slipped from bed and chucked the medicine into the fire.

"I'm not going to spoil the first good meal with that stuff. Missing one can't hurt me," he told himself.

Adam looked in at tea-time and beamed with pleasure when Michael announced that he had started a Coué cure.

"I've taken some exercise and air, and I've decided that every minute I'm getting better and better," he said.

"Splendid," Adam replied. "Now you will, without doubt. And to help you there's a visitor downstairs who would like to see you, if you feel up to it. The Seymours have dropped in for tea, and Miss Molly's quite worried about you. Will you see her?"

"Indeed I will," answered Michael eagerly. "How very kind of her to inquire."

## V.

Molly entered announcing cheerily: "Now I've started a scandal, Mr. Carteret. You ought to have seen the faces of the stodgies downstairs when the doctor said I might come up. The bunnies will be chattering—bunnies, you know, that's what I always call you all to daddy. Because you live in The Warren."

He smiled with real pleasure. Molly seemed to bring all the life and air of her own salt marshes with her.

"I'll try to live it down," he answered. "But it's awfully kind of you to come and see me. I've felt like death and destruction for the past few days."

Molly dropped into a chair and looked at him with sympathetic, yet puzzled, eyes.

"I'm sorry about this, Mr. Carteret," she said more gravely. "I wish you would tell me exactly what did happen to you."

"That's what I don't know," he replied. "But what have they told you?"

"They say you were attacked by the dog at Dyke. Nobody seems to think it unusual for you to have been there." There was an amused taunt in her voice. "Except me. I can't imagine why you walked out to that desolate spot." She became grave again. "But, honest, I don't expect to pry into the enemies' secrets, but I'd like to know all you—you feel you can tell me. I've got a reason."

There was something in her tone that impressed him with her sincerity. After all, he argued swiftly, since she knew he was at Dyke there was nothing much to hide.

"Shall we say I went to leave a Christmas card on Mr. Ray?" he answered whimsically. "And as there was nobody at home I was presumptious enough to wander round the place admiring the improvements. And then, let us imagine, conscience smote me. I felt I ought to get away quickly, lest my trespassing should be discovered. And as I fled, overwhelmed with shame at my iniquity—the dog went for me from behind. I went down and smashed my head against the wall, and but for good Adam, it seems, Mr. Ray's pet might have made a Christmas dinner of me. That's all I can tell you."

She listened intently; not even smiling in response to his own light smile.

"I was thinking," she said slowly, "that it was strange the dog waited so long."

Michael flushed. He felt he had blundered.

"Well, there it is," he said weakly.

Still grave and thoughtful, Molly met his questioning gaze frankly.

"Thank you," she said with a little nod. "Now, let's declare a few minutes' armistice, shall we?"

He welcomed the suggestion. Molly's questions had brought actively to his memory one or two disturbing details about the adventure at Dyke, details, which, in his past days of lethargy of mind, he had curiously ignored. He didn't want to worry about them now; he wanted to talk to Molly as friend to friend.

"I've hauled up a white flag," he laughed. "Tell me what sort of Christmas you had. Jolly, I hope."

And now she did return his smile. "Not so bad," she answered. "Sophie Vizard came down for a couple of days, and we had some neighbours in to dinner. But as cook I had to work pretty hard."

"I bet you did," he agreed.

"But things are looking up in the Seymour family," she went on. "Father has as good as promised us a real holiday soon. A whole month, Mr. Carteret, on the Riviera."

"Lucky you," he commented.

"It will only be at quite a small place—and at a pension, I expect. But you don't know how glad I shall be of the change. And it will do daddy a world of good. Do you know, I don't believe he's been away for more than an odd night or two for four years."

Michael was interested.

"It must be a monotonous life," he said.

"It is."

They chatted on, growing unconsciously more and more intimate. Molly spoke of the petty round of a remote country village. She was plucky enough, but even her magnificent courage could not keep the bitterness out of her voice at times.

"I don't know," she said, looking dreamily out at the window; "sometimes I think we're fools to go on keeping up this pretence of gentility on a peasant's income. And yet there is the land—what's left of it; and the name." She turned with a quick defiant little gesture to him. "What would you do? Would you fight on, or let the old traditions go and emigrate to a tiny flat in London?"

"I think I'd fight," he answered simply. "But, tell me, before the war, before the bad times came, it must have been very jolly at Street in those days. Were you the only child?"

She shook her head.

"I had an elder brother. He was a soldier. He was killed in '14, at Mons."

"And your mother?" he asked gently. "When did she die?"

Molly's face grew suddenly hard. She shrugged her shoulders.

"That I can't tell you," she answered deliberately. "You see—I'm a modern. We often don't know much about our mothers—or fathers."

There was a pain in her voice that hurt.

"You mean—— Oh, I'm so sorry," he said quickly.

"No need to be," she went on in the same hard, callous way. "It's common knowledge. And, besides, it's quite usual in these days, isn't it?" The mockery of her smile made him wince.

"I was quite a kiddie when she grew tired of

Street—and my father. They told me she'd gone abroad. It wasn't for years afterwards that I learnt the truth. She sent a message to daddy after Geoffrey was killed. She was nursing in France then. And I think that's the last anyone ever heard. Naturally, he doesn't speak much about her; it was my Aunt Mary, who kept house for us till I grew up, who told me. She's father's sister—I'm named after her," she added irrelevantly.

"She says it was—my mother's—temperament. That father should never have brought her into the depths of the country. She was very beautiful and very gay." Molly's voice grew soft and reminiscent. "She had lived all her life in busy places, and she loved lights and excitement—like I do, really. And she couldn't settle down here. And so—well, she just went."

"I'm so sorry," he said in distress. "Poor—Molly."

Impulsively she flung out her hand.

"Thanks," she said with a strange gruffness. "But I don't want to be pitied. I hate pity. But it may help you to—understand—why—why I sometimes think—differently from other girls. It makes you—hard, in a way, and careless. And a sort of devil gets into you and you want to run your own life—in your own way."

There came a knock at the door, and Molly withdrew her hand swiftly.

Ethel, the servant maid, entered with a tray bearing Michael's egg tea.

Molly's mood changed in a flash. She nodded pleasantly at the maid and took the tray from her.

"I'm Mr. Carteret's nurse this afternoon," she said gaily. "Come along, Mr. Carteret; medicine, too, I see. Before or after meals?"

"Neither," he said; "I won't take it."

"Yes, you will. No nonsense of that kind. Which is it?"

Michael eyed a brown egg and some crisp buttered toast.

"Well, if it's got to be, I'll get it over first." He laughed, and grabbed the potion, swallowing it in a gulp. "Ugh!" He replaced the glass with an expression of disgust. "It's supposed to be after, but I don't suppose it makes a bit of difference. Now, in a minute I can enjoy my tea. Molly, I'm getting better."

She laughed.

"They always say it's a good sign when the patient gets refractory," she said.

Their conversation drifted round to The Warren. Molly told of a new patient who had arrived, a woman.

"She's young and beautiful with cropped hair as short as your own. A very modern young woman who swears and shocks the rest of the bunnies. Dr. Adam says she's on the stage."

"Really," Michael said, munching a piece of toast, "she sounds exciting."

"She'll vamp you, Mr. Carteret; she looks a real film villainess."

Adam himself arrived at that moment.

"Time's up," he said cheerfully, "and the Major's getting alarmed. How's the patient?"

"Every day and in every way——" Michael mumbled with his mouth half full of egg.

"Then you can see another visitor, I suppose," the doctor interrupted. He looked at him more seriously for a moment. "Yes, a great improvement. This is splendid! We'll have him up to-morrow, Miss Molly."

"Who's the visitor?" asked Michael.

"Your father," replied Adam. "He and Mrs. Stanford have driven over from Bury."

"Send 'em up, doctor," said Michael. "M-Miss Seymour, you must wait and see my respected father. You might be up before him one day, and it's just as well to know——"

The jest slipped out unthinkingly, and he broke off in confusion.

Molly flashed a quick, hurt glance at him, while Adam guffawed boisterously.

"But I've met him already," she said after a moment. "Didn't I tell you?"

"No," he answered blankly.

"Well, I have, and I think he's a dear. I know he'd never send me to gaol. He'd misdirect the jury shamelessly on my account."

"Let's put the question to Sir Guy himself," said Adam. "I will go and bring him up."

## VI.

Michael was amused at the meeting between Molly and his family. The Judge greeted her in his happy, easy way as an old acquaintance, and made some light remark about her schoolgirl complexion which Michael did not understand.

But Molly flushed prettily and grew suddenly shy, not so much at Sir Guy's pleasantry as at the unmistakable scrutiny, veiled though it was, that she was undergoing from Catherine Stanford. Kitty Stanford had scented a romance and was by no means pleased about it.

When Molly had gone she turned to her brother.

"Who's your very charming companion, Michael?" she asked in her most managing voice.

"Major Seymour's cook," the streak of natural mischief in him made him reply.

Kitty Stanford sniffed.

"Why so mysterious? Is there any secret about her?" she pursued.

"I answered your question, Kitty," he said. "She's also the daughter of a local squire—Major Seymour. She's really quite presentable, if poor."

The Judge broke in with an amused smile. Like Michael, he knew, and liked to chaff, his daughter's domineering manner.

"Who do you say she is, my boy?" he asked.

They discussed Molly and the Seymours for the time being, then reverted to Michael's health. Kitty, after her first gesture of authority, became more human, and both she and her father were mightily relieved at the obvious improvement in the patient, of which Rafe Adam had already assured them. They left soon, to drive back to Willowhurst, the Stanfords' place near Bury, where Sir Guy had been spending Christmas, and when they had gone Michael felt the reaction of the afternoon's excitements.

He grew terribly weary again, and a mood of despondence came over him. Once more he was in the grip of that depression of body and mind which he had hoped had passed. He fell into a restless half-waking sleep, fretful and disappointed, from which he was aroused some time later by yet another unexpected visitor.

This time it was the grim, impassive face of Sir Robert Sark upon which his eyes fell, as he stirred uneasily, in his first wakeful moments.

Once again Michael's impression was that of the passionless power of the man. He loomed at his side like some inexorable machine in human form. The flinty eyes told nothing of the thoughts they veiled. The hard, strong jaw was set.

Sark stood for some moments as if looking clean into Michael's soul. Then in his harsh, metallic voice he rapped out a question at Rafe Adam, who stood hovering, attendant-like, behind him.

"Why was I not informed of this earlier?" he asked. "Leave me alone with Mr. Carteret; I should like to make an independent diagnosis."

Rafe Adam went silently from the room, making no reply, and Michael, now thoroughly awake, felt indignant at the brutality of the specialist's tone.

And a little scared too; Sark's whole attitude suggested that he took a serious view of the case. What an unsympathetic beast the man was! Surely the essence of the art of healing was to keep from a sick man your graver fears. Sark seemed to glory in doing exactly the opposite.

The specialist addressed himself for the first time to Michael.

"Lift your head up, will you? I want to see the wound."

Michael obeyed with growing anger in his heart.

Sark deftly removed the plaster and prodded the scar with amazing gentleness. "How did this happen?" he asked curtly.

Michael's voice was cold.

"Ask Dr. Adam," he said. "I know nothing but that I was suddenly felled. A brute of a dog sprang at me, I am told."

"I trust they've shot the dog," Sark commented without expression.

He replaced the strapping and drew up a chair.

"And the result has been," he went on in the same level voice, "that . . ." He gave Michael a far more detailed and accurate description of his symptoms than ever he could have given for himself.

He had to admire Sark, much as he disliked him; the man's knowledge was immense.

"Yes, that is exactly how I feel," he admitted.

Sir Robert went on to question him about the events of that afternoon.

"And you reacted to companionship and felt better, eh?"

"Yes."

"Then the exhaustion and lassitude came on again?"

"Yes."

"And now you are roused from that lassitude by an active sense of dislike of me, eh?"

"Yes," said Michael, taken aback, but determined to meet the specialist's rude candour in the same way.

Sark put his head back and gave one of his rare, bull-like roars of laughter.

"I like frankness, it does good, not harm, as fools think it does," he commented after a few moments. "You're one of the very few honest patients I have. You are curing yourself of the old trouble, and you can cure yourself of this. Adam was right; I was wrong. He said you needed change. I told him he was a fool. But you do. I'm going to send you up to London for a week. You can do what you like except work. You can sit up all night if you like, get drunk if you like. But I happen to know you won't."

Michael's feeling of inferiority to this man, whom he detested so intensely, forbade him making any comment. One simply had to submit oneself to Sark and accept his rudenesses.

"When am I to go?" he asked.

"In two or three days' time. Adam will tell you. You ought to feel better by then, but whether you do or not, you'd better go. And then go and see people, go to the theatres, dance if you like it. I shall want to see you after you've been up a week. I venture to state that you'll be very glad, then, if I tell you to come back here."

"Very well. I am in your hands."

"You couldn't be in better ones," said Sir Robert, as if announcing a self-evident fact. "I'm making a very satisfactory job of you, Mr. Carteret. Good-evening."

He rose abruptly from his chair and stalked out of the room, leaving Michael still angry and bewildered, but enormously relieved.

# CHAPTER X

## I.

When Rafe Adam visited Michael the next morning he brought news of Mr. Pell's return.

"Our earnest ornithologist seems to have had quite a gay time in London," he said. "He's anxious to see you; do you feel up to it?" Adam smiled knowingly.

"I think so," Michael answered innocently. "Sir Robert seemed to believe company was good for me."

The doctor nodded.

"A rough way, Sark's, but he's a marvel—a genius. I'll tell Mr. Pell."

The little man arrived towards the middle of the morning. Michael had to grin when he heard the gentle tap at his door and Mr. Pell's deprecatory voice saying mildly:

"You are quite, quite sure I shan't tire you, Mr. Carteret. I wouldn't intrude for one moment if I felt I were unwelcome."

The door closed and Mr. Pell came across to the bedside.

"My dear Carteret, I'm extremely sorry about this business. And puzzled, too. Are you fit enough to tell me what happened?" Mr. Pell was frowning and worried.

Michael made an effort to appear more cheerful than he felt.

"I'm always at my best in the mornings," he said. "There's not much to tell of before the accident, except failure." He smiled bitterly. "And afterwards—well, I suppose Adam's told you about that."

"Yes, I've heard Adam's account," said Mr. Pell dryly.

The little man listened intently while Michael told his story. Then:

"Let's have a look at that crack on the skull," he said.

Much as Sir Robert Sark had done, and almost as tenderly, he examined the wound. He refixed the plaster in quite a professional manner, and pulled an easy-chair across the room.

"It's a plausible story, Carteret," he said in a thoughtful, perplexed tone; "but there are one or two things that don't hang together in it."

Michael grew alert.

"There are one or two things that have rather puzzled me," he said. "Yesterday, when Miss Seymour was here——"

"Oh, she's been to see you, has she?" Mr. Pell put in quietly.

"Yes; and very kind it was of her, too," Michael retorted, with a touch of quite unnecessary resentment.

"Very," Mr. Pell agreed. "But you were saying?"

A little sulkily, Michael went on.

"She raised a point," he said, "that had never occurred to me. She was saying she thought it funny the dog waited so long——"

"She did, did she?" Mr. Pell's eyebrows lifted.

"—and, naturally, I couldn't tell her why; but, do you know, it was only then that I wondered for the first time what happened to the fellow who disturbed me, and why the beast didn't go for him, or bark, at any rate. Adam never mentioned anybody else."

Mr. Pell leaned forward.

"As you say, an interesting problem," he replied.

"But here is another. I'd stake quite a fair reputation as a toxicologist that that dog was insensible for fully two hours, and drowsy for two more." He stared meaningly into Michael's bewildered eyes. "Shortly, we can eliminate the dog, Carteret."

"But, good Lord, man! What are you suggesting? That Adam lied, or—or——" A look of enlightenment came over his face. "You mean that the fellow who interrupted me hit me, and Adam is keeping his mouth shut for some reason or another?"

"Something of that kind," said Mr. Pell with a nod. "But there's another point. I feel sure that the blow you got on the back of your head wouldn't have put you out for more than a very few minutes. Why, the thing's practically healed. What do you make of that?"

Michael shook his head vaguely.

"I make nothing of it," he replied blankly. "The whole thing seems unpleasantly mysterious. I'm not quite up to puzzles yet. Tell me what you mean."

Mr. Pell's face darkened; a fierce indignation showed plainly in the brown eyes.

"Just a moment—just a moment," he said with impatience. "Tell me about your illness. What are the symptoms?"

Wearily Michael told him all he could, and the look of indignation deepened to one of real anger. Mr. Pell's questions became curt.

"What treatment have you been having?"

"Nothing but dressing the scalp, and a tonic."

"How often do you take that tonic?"

"Four times a day."

Mr. Pell got up and amazed Michael with a savage oath. Then:

"The infernal scoundrel," he said, the brown eyes now blazing with wrath. "Carteret, let me see your arms."

Michael, dazed and apprehensive, extended them. Mr. Pell rolled back the pyjama sleeves and examined the skin carefully.

"Ah!" he ejaculated with satisfaction after a few moments. "The doctor never had to give you a hypodermic injection, did he?"

"Not so far as I know."

Mr. Pell's jaw seemed to grow square. He beat on the edge of the bed with a clenched fist.

"Carteret, don't you take one more drop of that filthy medicine," he said with passion.

"Why not? What do you mean?"

"I mean," said Mr. Pell more calmly now, "that the whole of this illness of yours is a most cunningly devised fraud that would defeat any unsuspecting person. You've simply been drugged, my dear fellow. Drugged with a hypodermic injection soon after you were knocked down, and kept here in bed with drugs ever since. Left to yourself at Dyke you would have been up in a few minutes and, with nothing more than a sore head, could have walked home."

Michael raised himself slowly on his elbows, his eyes wide open in utter amazement, and showing in them the vague fear of a secret danger.

"But—but, good God, man! If what you say is true, who—who could have done this? Not Adam?"

"Who else?"

Mr. Pell's mouth closed with a snap. There was an expression of inexorable detestation upon the dark face.

"Adam? But why? Do you mean to say the man's been deliberately poisoning me?"

"I do. After all, when you come to think of it, it's a very simple method of keeping you out of mischief, isn't it?"

"But what for?"

"So that you shouldn't go nosing round Dyke or anywhere else where you weren't wanted."

Slowly the truth came filtering into Michael's dulled brain.

"You mean he—he is one of this smuggling gang?" he asked in a voice little above a whisper.

"Very much so," said Mr. Pell grimly.

"Then he was the man at Dyke; he hit me."

"Without doubt. You can acquit the dog." Mr. Pell gave a cynical laugh.

"But this beastly drugging. Sark, when he was here yesterday, why didn't he spot it? He seemed to agree with Adam against his own first impressions."

"Why should Sark suspect that Adam was drugging one of his patients? Your symptoms are most natural. I told you this scheme was so diabolically cunning that it would deceive anybody who did not suspect. I happened to be very suspicious. Sark may have been dissatisfied; he wanted to get you away, you said."

Michael nodded stupidly. The whole revelation had come to him so unexpectedly that it left him bemused.

"So you knew Adam was in this business all along?" he queried.

"I've guessed it for some time," said Mr. Pell. "Consider The Warren, my dear Carteret. Has it never struck you what a curious place it is—how they demonstrate this new cranky idea of treatment for neurasthenics almost to absurdity? What sort of treatment have you had here, or I, or any of them so far as I know. You're fed on the fat of the land, made very comfortable, and told to go and walk about and get well. And once a day Rafe Adam has one of his boisterous conversations with you and tells you how splendidly you're doing. All that for twenty guineas a week; at least, that's what he is charging me."

Michael grinned in a helpless way.

"Now you point it out, it's quite true," he said. "Of me, at any rate. But I had an idea that I was a special case."

"I think we most of us believe that. But you see how easy it is for this contraband business. Nobody suspects curious people and curious doings at a nursing home."

"Do you suspect anybody else here of being mixed up with the smugglers?" Michael asked.

Mr. Pell gave a vague wave of the hand. "I suspect everybody until I satisfy myself I'm wrong. For some days I was almost convinced you were in it. I'm afraid I followed you a lot, without your knowing it, when you first came down. And your swiftly acquired interest in Miss Molly struck me as rather unusual."

Michael felt the blood rush suddenly to his temples. Molly—Molly a fellow-conspirator of Rafe Adam! Did Molly know what the doctor had done to him?

Yesterday afternoon at tea-time it was she who had insisted so positively that he must take his medicine! The thought filled him with doubt and shame. She couldn't be so vile. It was unthinkable.

His voice was harsh in an effort to try to speak with unconcern.

"Do you think the Seymours know what Adam's been up to?" he asked.

Mr. Pell's brown eyes wandered to the ceiling.

"Most sincerely I hope not," he answered in a queer tone.

Michael echoed the wish with warmth, and Mr. Pell deftly shifted the conversation.

"But I don't think we'll waste time on vain surmise," he said. "There are plenty of facts to tackle. Our Mr. Ray has arrived, for one thing, with motor-car and motor-boat complete, as they say in the Army. We must investigate Mr. Ray and his motor-boat. But the first thing is for you to get well."

"I'll do my best," Carteret put in.

"It should be quite simple. No medicine, and downstairs to meals as soon as possible," advised Mr. Pell. "I think you'll feel a giant refreshed to-morrow if you keep off Adam's little potion."

And Mr. Pell was right. Michael woke the next morning with a new feeling of vigour. Rafe Adam professed enormous delight.

Michael found it hard to act his part in face of the doctor's monstrous, hypocritical good nature, but, as Mr. Pell had impressed upon him, he must give no shadow or sign of suspicion.

He came down that afternoon and seized the opportunity over tea to protest humorously to the doctor.

"I'm going to rebel," he laughed. "I'm so much fitter I won't take that nauseous tonic; it puts me off my food. Do let me off, doctor."

There was no flicker of surprise in Adam's eyes as he answered most genially:

"By all means. If you can get out again, it will do you much more good than my boluses. Knock it off for a bit, anyhow."

Later on the doctor tackled him about his proposed holiday in London. "There's no reason why you shouldn't go as soon as you like," he said.

Michael answered with an innocent smile.

"Look here, doctor, if I am going to have a holiday I want to make the best of it. Would it matter if I put it off for a day or two? Everybody's still away—my sister and my father—and half my pals are in Switzerland. I don't want to be stranded in town all alone."

Adam quite understood. Perhaps it would be better to leave it for a day or two, he agreed. Anyhow, Sark had left the whole matter in his hands.

Michael told Mr. Pell the news that evening. The little man had been out for hours watching his beloved birds. He nodded thoughtfully.

"A little too ready to oblige, I'm afraid," he commented. "I'm curious to see what their next move is."

## II.

Michael's recovery was rapid. He felt a little shaky, but otherwise very fairly fit.

Rafe Adam did not return to the subject of his going away, and Mr. Pell was 'out on the marshes' practically the whole of the next two days, so that Michael was thrown more or less upon his own resources.

It looked as though the little man were deliberately avoiding Michael, except that now and again, in an undertone, at dinner or when they met in the lounge he would murmur, "Everything is all right," and once: "I'm not going to bother you for a day or two."

Mr. Pell developed a heavy flirtation with the newcomer, the short-haired, short-frocked, very much made-up Miss Gervoise. The other patients at The Warren were mightily entertained in watching the ludicrous companionship. Mr. Pell took Miss Gervoise sailing one morning and played poker patience with her in the evening.

"Such a very charming woman! And so witty! And an actress too!" said Mr. Pell, rather proudly, to Dr. Adam, speaking appreciatively of Alys

Gervoise. "One hardly expects a love of Nature in such a gay and up-to-date young lady. But Miss Gervoise has her serious side, believe me, Dr. Adam."

And Adam, who, in common with the rest of the guests, had heard Alys Gervoise's own humorous account of Mr. Pell's devotion to her, agreed heartily.

Michael returned from one of his first walks, a solitary one, during which his mind had been filled with conflicting thoughts of Molly, to find that Mr. Arthur Ray had called to see him.

It was just before tea-time, and Mr. Ray was chatting amiably with Mr. Pell and Miss Gervoise.

"My dear Mr. Carteret," said Mr. Ray as Michael entered the room, "I've come to make my most humble apologies."

For a moment Michael did not understand.

"Oh yes. But why?" he asked politely, staring rather blankly at the smiling figure with hand outstretched in such a friendly way.

Mr. Ray was attired in jacket and plus fours of thorn-proof tweed, thick stockings, and heavy boots with anklets. But that everything looked too new, the make-up was excellent. The loose cut of his clothes went splendidly with his genial, smiling, rubicund face. Mr. Ray looked as if he had always lived in the country and liked it.

"About that brute of a dog of mine," he said. "Of course, I've had him shot; but that doesn't make you much better, eh? My dear fellow, I do hope you'll understand——"

He buttonholed Michael and led him off to a quiet corner, explaining how he could never forgive himself for the injury, inadvertently, he had brought about.

Mr. Ray's over-geniality was most marked. He treated Michael, whom he had met but once before, as an old friend, and Michael, with design, played up to the part. There was, he guessed quickly enough, something behind this sudden display of intimacy.

Mr. Ray would not stay for tea.

"No, no," he said with a knowing smile. "I don't believe in tea; a bad drink, a bad drink, my boy, don't you think?"

Michael suggested a whisky and soda.

"Ah!" said Mr. Ray; "now you're talking. Perhaps just a spot; just one, eh?"

Michael went in search of the drink and ran into Rafe Adam.

"Bring him into my study," said Adam in his understanding way. "He's a queer chap, Ray; he'd probably be much happier here with you."

Mr. Ray had two good pegs and then just one final, 'as a binder,' he expressed it.

"Now I really must get off," he said. "But, look here, Carteret, I've got a motor-boat down here. An old M.L. converted, you know; quite cosy, a decent little canteen on board." He laughed slyly. "What about a run round the harbour to-morrow? Bring your gun, we might get a shot at something. You and I must get to know one another better."

Michael's eyes displayed nothing but the most guileless of pleasure as he answered:

"That would be very kind of you, Ray; I'll come like a bird."

"Fishy, very fishy," was Mr. Pell's remark when Michael told him of the incident later on. "Things are coming to a head, Carteret. This may be mere dust in our eyes or, more likely, they want you out of the way to-morrow. I shouldn't wonder if that engine broke down and you were late back from your trip."

Mr. Pell was calm and positive, but to Michael this feeling of hidden hostility, working in the dark against him, was eerie. The knowledge that he had been deliberately drugged had left a vivid sense of apprehension in his mind.

"Shall I go?" he asked.

"By all means," said Mr. Pell. "I'm curious to know all I can about that boat. Ray moors her at the mouth of the river, not off Dyke. She's run for him by young Dan Davis, the old fisherman's son. Ray goes out in her and shoots off a gun now and again. I've watched him. Quite a sportsman is our Mr. Ray; he missed a sitting sea-gull yesterday afternoon."

Mr. Pell chuckled.

"Yes, go, Carteret, and be as friendly as you like. He must know that you suspect him, but he may be trying to find out how much more you suspect. He'll probably try the effects of his canteen on you——"

"Not drugs again?" Michael put in sharply.

"Alcohol is a drug," said Mr. Pell with a smile; "I suspect nothing worse. He'll try to make you chatty. From the look of Mr. Ray, he'll find the occupation a congenial one. Talk to him, talk volubly, but talk bosh."

They were interrupted then, and but for a hurried 'I shall be away all day to-morrow' from Mr. Pell, spoken during a boring monologue on the migration of swallows, as they sat over coffee, a monologue addressed mainly to Alys Gervoise, who hardly took the trouble to conceal her amusement, Michael had no further talk with Mr. Pell that night.

## III.

Mr. Ray called in the morning. When Michael joined him in the big glass-covered verandah that stretched the length of the south side of The Warren

—the sun-trap, as it was known—Mr. Ray was engaged in lively conversation with Miss Gervoise.

"Oh, you two selfish men," she cried, getting up as Michael appeared. "Fancy going out on that gorgeous water on a day like this to kill things."

Mr. Ray, it was obvious, would far rather have delayed his sporting expedition. Miss Gervoise's undeniable fascination had evidently appealed to him.

"And I've got to stay in this damned hole," said Miss Gervoise with shameless modernity. She puffed a cigarette with vigour.

"But why?" asked Mr. Ray. "Why not join us? If Miss Gervoise would come it would add to our pleasure no end, what, Carteret?"

"Of course," Michael agreed with as much sincerity as he could affect.

He had grown suddenly suspicious. This was a very swift friendship, even for the over-friendly Mr. Ray.

Miss Gervoise glanced boldly at Mr. Ray.

"If you really mean it," she said.

"Don't you take any chances," said Mr. Ray in an intimate tone. "Come along. Just shove a hat and coat on, and we'll show you the sights of Salthithe."

Miss Gervoise threw her cigarette into a flower-pot.

"And I bet you could," she answered, again with that bold smile. "But you've brought it on yourselves; I'm coming."

She dived into the house, and Mr. Ray turned to Michael.

"A little rapid, that young person—what? But very nice!" He leered. "You know, Carteret, I think I'm going to have a nervous breakdown. Any vacancies here at The Warren for a new patient?"

Michael could have kicked the man, despite the ever-deepening suspicion that the incident was not as spontaneous as it seemed. He took refuge in heavy sarcasm.

"Just the simple frankness of the modern girl," he said.

"And very refreshing, too," said Mr. Ray, rubbing his hands.

Mr. Ray's idea of shooting was quaint. It centred mostly in that 'little canteen.'

His launch, a converted war-time M.L., roared about the harbour, scaring every bird within a mile, and using petrol in a prodigal manner.

"Of course, we've got this thing," he said, indicating an out-board motor, "but you can't get any speed out of it. And I know Miss Gervoise likes speed."

"You bet I do," she said, her hard eyes bright with excitement.

It was mild and sunny, with a touch of spring in the air. Young Dan Davis took them out into the open sea and along the coast. Michael's suspicions began to dull; Mr. Ray was so patently in a state of foolish elation over the attentions the actress paid him.

"We can go shooting any day, but we can't always have beauty at the helm," Mr. Ray announced with satisfaction as Miss Gervoise, cigarette in mouth, steered the boat through a placid, oily sea northward towards Oldford.

"I don't know about beauty, but what about lunch?" said Alys Gervoise in a matter-of-fact tone. "I'm hungry, if you aren't."

Mr. Ray's baggy eyes scanned the neighbouring shore. A quarter of a mile away the front of Oldford, with its two big hotels and long row of lodging houses, looked almost summery under the January sun. Mr. Ray turned to young Dan.

"Is the Palace open in the winter?" he asked.

"Yes, sir; open all the year."

Mr. Ray smiled with satisfaction.

"What about landing and having lunch—a real, good lunch?" he said. "They do you well at the Palace—I know."

Alys Gervoise clapped her hands.

"You clever boy," she cooed.

Michael, alert and suspecting, forced a smile of assent.

"Good idea," he said.

So it was a put-up job, after all; but what was going to happen now? The joy of fight arose in him. It was two to one, but surely he was capable of dealing with these two in a battle of wits.

"Do let me steer her in; it's so thrilling," Miss Gervoise begged. "Dan, what do I do?"

Young Dan, wooden-faced and scornful, directed the boat's course while Alys burbled with delight, under the impression that she herself was piloting the craft.

They neared the beach. The boy was standing by the engine.

"Now then, miss, hard over," he called suddenly.

"Oh, what does that mean?" Alys called to the skies.

There was a sudden bump.

Young Dan Davis blurted out indignantly: "Now, we've done it. Gone aground on an ebb. We'll be here till four."

"What does it matter?" said Mr. Ray magnanimously. "It'll take us till then to have our lunch. Pull up that dinghy and land us."

The lad scowled.

Michael smiled quietly to himself. "Clever, but clumsy," was his silent comment.

## IV.

Molly Seymour was worried; life was getting rapidly out of hand.

It was all Michael Carteret's fault, she told herself again and again. Until he had appeared at Salthithe she had not bothered about things very much.

This smuggling business, into which she had thrown herself so light-heartedly, had been a great and wonderful game that had helped to break the monotony of a penurious existence and promised dream-like rewards that should lift her and her father out of the soul-killing struggle of shabby gentility.

True, the rewards had been earned and received. The Seymours now were better off financially than they had been for years. But, somehow, that money paid by Sophie Vizard in crisp notes did not satisfy. Her father was fretful and harassed, and she herself was filled with vague fears and uncertainties just because that stupid Michael Carteret had been thrown by Fate into her life, by means of a stranded boat on the harbour mud flats.

Molly had had a trying and busy morning at the Grange, and much more trying work was imminent. Yet the household must be carried on just the same. Molly had driven herself into Oldford after lunch to do some necessary shopping, choosing Oldford, which she hated, rather than Ipswich, because it was ten miles nearer.

Oldford always appeared to her as depressing. In summer she loathed its crowd of care-free, arrogant visitors; in winter, its neglected finery, its last year's placards of concerts and regattas flapping in the wind, its deserted front, and closed-up lodging houses, made her inexpressibly gloomy.

Anxious to get out of the place as quickly as possible, she was hurrying from the chemist's to the tobacconist's, bent on a commission for her father, when she came face to face with Michael Carteret.

Michael exclaimed frankly: "Good Lord!" His eyes lit up with pleasure as he threw out both hands, adding: "What a bit of luck!"

Molly felt her cheeks flush and hated herself for it. There was consternation in her big blue eyes. But there was gladness, too. It took a couple of seconds for her to recover from her surprise, then:

"What on earth are you doing here?" she said, wrinkling her brow as if in reproof.

Michael was doing some very quick thinking. Was this all part of the plot? If it were—— A careless, mischievous mood came over him. Hang Mr. Pell and his instructions! He would follow his own instinct for once and attack rather than defend.

"I've escaped," he said lightly. "They've kidnapped me, but I've escaped. And now you have got to help me get clear away."

A quick, fearful expression crossed Molly's face.

"What *are* you talking about?" she asked sharply.

"Mr. Ray and the vamp," he answered mysteriously. "Hush! Of course, you don't know anything about it," he smiled, "but they're up at the Palace Hotel, drinking liqueurs. They think I've gone out to buy some vulgar cigarettes that gilded hotel would not demean itself by selling. But, really, I've run away. Molly—save me."

Molly looked almost frightened.

"I wish you would talk sense," she said seriously. "Who's the vamp? Why are you here?"

She was, indeed, momentarily alarmed. That Michael Carteret should be in Oldford was not 'according to plan,' so far as she knew.

Michael became less frivolous. He told her. "And so," he finished candidly, "whatever the little game may be, I've dished it. I don't like your Mr. Ray; I'm not interested in sweet Alys. Whatever they've got up their sleeves for me, they can keep there, Molly. Now, accept defeat like a sportsman, and help me to get home. Are you driving back?"

She nodded, still trying to sort out in her mind exactly what had happened, according to Michael's cheery tale.

"Take me part of the way?" he asked, as if daring her to refuse.

Molly decided quickly.

"If you wait till I've bought daddy's cigars, yes," she said, bolting into the shop.

Michael stood on the pavement, excited and wondering. That Ray and Alys Gervoise had some plan to deal with him he had not the slightest doubt. But that plot would certainly now miscarry. He couldn't help it if they were offended. Alys Gervoise's coquetries were sickening, and Ray was offensive. He chuckled to think of them waiting there for his return—the biters bit.

Molly came out of the tobacconist's, a more composed expression on her face now. Michael looked at her in admiration. Not one trace of the thought that she might be party to that horrible drugging was in his mind then. He had almost disassociated her from the smugglers, and Mr. Pell's ominous suggestions of all that enterprise meant.

"How far will you take me?" he asked gaily.

She laughed.

"You've delivered yourself into my hands," she said; "I shall probably drive you to Street, and you'll have to walk home."

"It will be worth it," he answered, jumping into the seat by her side. He began to chatter about Mr. Ray and *Jaz Jaz*, his motor-boat.

But Molly scarcely responded to his conversation. She asked a few conventional questions about his health, then lapsed into silence. For she was a little scared at what she was doing; Michael Carteret was making things more perplexing for her than ever. Yet she could not have refused him, she tried to console herself.

It was so hard to think of this man as an enemy, and yet he was. He had vowed to her to frustrate that upon which she and her father had been busy all that morning. If he won, then father and she went down. Molly shivered. Michael was quick to notice it.

"Here, you're cold," he said. "Shove this coat over you."

He had slipped from his heavy coat as he spoke.

Molly refused his offer.

"No, no. It's nothing," she said.

He looked at her anxiously, and she felt that she must force herself to talk.

"Funny old car, isn't it?" she said nervously.

"I think I've been in it before," he answered with a quiet smile.

"Have you? When? Oh——"

Confusion overcame her at his laughing:

"The first time we met."

She could think of no response.

A few minutes later Michael broke the silence.

"That chap Ray was decent enough to apologize for what that brute of a dog of his did to me."

He seemed to be gazing casually at the straight road ahead, but he flashed a quick glance, sidelong, at her, and he saw her flush once more.

"It—it was the least he could do," she answered without turning her head.

A sudden impulse came to him to try her.

"He says he has shot the beast," he said quietly. "I'm sorry; it seems unfair, doesn't it?"

The car swerved.

"I—I don't know," she said, and her breath came hardly, the eyelids quivered, and her mouth was tight drawn.

"Because I like dogs," he went on in the same even tone. "And if it did come for me, it was only doing its job. But—I sometimes wonder if it did."

Molly's face grew hard; she fumbled without reason at the gears and accelerated suddenly.

"What on earth do you mean?" she asked in a voice, different from any he had heard from her before.

He decided to chance a further throw.

"I mean—I wonder if you know what really did happen at Dyke that day?"

Molly brought the car to a sudden stop.

"No," she said. "How should I know? I think you're asking rather a curious question, Mr. Carteret. Do you suggest anything?"

"I'm glad you don't know," was all he answered, looking at her very seriously.

Molly started the car as abruptly as she had halted it. Her face was burning now, and her eyes puckered with pain. To his commonplace remarks she made no retort. He could see that she was suffering, and the knowledge saddened him, for it told him so clearly that she did know.

Presently a lonely signpost by the wayside pointed a road to the right: 'Salthithe 8 miles.' Molly slowed down.

"This is as far as I'm taking you," she said with a pathetic attempt at indifference. "You'll find a village about a mile on. Someone there will run you back to The Warren."

Michael never knew the effort it cost her to say even so much. Molly Seymour, the fearless, who scorned emotion as a weak and pitiable thing, was near to breaking-point. She dared not drive Michael another mile; she was afraid of herself.

She had lied to him, she who had promised to play fair, and it made her feel inexpressibly mean. Yet in a muddled way she half blamed him for her sin. Why had he forced himself upon her? Why couldn't he keep away? Go away as she had once begged him to do?

To him, this warfare of theirs was an amusing interlude. To her, it loomed now as a grim and terrible actuality from which, she admitted to herself now, she shrank.

Without protest, Michael accepted his dismissal. He stood in the road, cap in hand, speaking foolish, silly words of thanks. She hardly heard what he did say. But she knew that he looked hurt—and disappointed, as if in a moment he had been robbed of some treasured belief.

"Good-bye, and thanks so much," he said in that too perfectly correct tone that rings of insincerity.

She tried to speak, then checked herself. Tried once more; then, as it seemed, almost beside herself, she flung at him:

"I've tried to play fair, but you won't let me. Why won't you go away? I've asked you to before; I beg you to now. I'm nothing to you; why can't you leave me alone?"

She saw him stiffen suddenly as if her words had stung him. His face was terribly grave, and those baffling eyes, which but a few moments before had been wrinkling at the corners as he chaffed her, were intensely solemn. She could not meet them; they appeared to accuse her.

He answered her with the simplicity of a child telling in awe of some great and wonderful discovery.

"But you are—everything to me, Molly," he said slowly.

She dared listen no longer. He heard her tragic little sob of pain as she bent down quickly and grabbed feverishly at those soulless levers.

The car jumped forward and shot, with dangerous speed, along the rough, deserted road, leaving him alone, gazing longingly at its swiftly receding form. It faded to a tiny blur before he turned to stride vigorously towards Salthithe.

But Molly drove on madly, hardly seeing, hardly caring how she went.

"It isn't fair! It isn't fair!" she kept whispering to herself.

## V.

A mile along the Salthithe road a little hamlet clustered around a church, an inn, and an ancient smithy that now proclaimed itself 'Garage.' Here, after a tedious delay, Michael succeeded in getting a car to take him home.

He was utterly miserable. As he looked at himself, mentally, he had played a poor part in the drama that centred about Molly's life. He had wanted to help her, and all he had done was to hinder her. He had intruded where it would have been far better to have stood aside. After all, what right had he to interfere in Molly's affairs? True, he had promised to 'shut the mouths' of those persons who were talking of her irregular occupation. Instead, he had joined forces with this mysterious fellow Pell, who was out to bring Molly's lamentable activities to ruin; and her with it. Again he asked himself the question: Who was this chap Pell, anyhow?

Why had he not told Molly the whole truth, told her what Pell was up to, and gone openly to fight by her side? It was no good lying to himself; he loved her, he had loved her for weeks past. And now he had told her so.

Of that he was immensely glad; but where would it lead him? How could he ever expect her to return his love while he plotted and conspired with this man Pell?

And yet, what was this sinister organization in which she, so clean and splendid a girl, was entrapped? What could she have to do with that dangerous hypocrite Adam, the vulgar Ray, the painted Alys Gervoise, and Heaven alone knew how many other people?

Groping in a mental darkness, and seeing no gleam of light or hope, Michael was surprised when the car pulled up at The Warren. Rafe Adam, chatting with a gardener, looked up with suspicion in his eyes.

"Hallo! Where's the rest of the party?" The look of suspicion faded to one of polite interest. "Deserted the charming Miss Gervoise and our new neighbour?" he asked, smiling now.

Michael forced an answering smile.

"Yes, ran away from them," he said. "And, between ourselves, I don't expect they'll mind very much. Two's company—you know, doctor."

Rafe Adam nodded in his genial, understanding manner.

"As a matter of fact, I left them sitting over lunch at the Palace, at Oldford. I ran into Miss Seymour there and she gave me a lift most of the way back." Michael eyed the doctor keenly to see the effect of his words upon him.

But Rafe Adam betrayed merely a friendly amusement.

"I think yours was the better taste," he said confidentially; then in a graver tone: "But you're not keeping up your improvement, my dear fellow. I don't like this; you are looking all ragged again. I think the time has come for you to get away quickly or I shall have you in bed again and Robert Sark on to me, expressing displeasure." He shook his head thoughtfully. "No, I shall send you off to-morrow, Carteret, or we shall both be in trouble."

# CHAPTER XI

## I.

Mr. Pell had gone into Chipping Langham that morning.

From the crest of the rise, three-quarters of a mile behind Salthithe, he had watched, through his binoculars, *Jaz Jaz,* the motor-launch, and her party careering out of the mouth of the Walm into the sunlit harbour, and a few moments later stopped the morning omnibus and climbed inside.

When he dismounted at the Bugle, Ellen Kennedy was standing in the group of passengers waiting to join the bus there for Ipswich. Their eyes met, yet neither made any sign of recognition. But Mr. Pell drifted aimlessly under the great archway of the inn, and, pretending to study the luncheon menu displayed there, in fact was studying Ellen's face, first as she made her way into the vehicle, and afterwards as she sat talking in an animated way to a chance companion by her side.

Mr. Pell stayed in shelter until the bus moved off, then he pursued his way towards the little street that led up by the church, frowning and preoccupied.

He took more than ordinary precautions before entering the tobacco shop; it was an unusual event for Mr. Pell to visit Kennedy's in broad daylight. When at last he did enter, it would have seemed to any onlooker that the little badger-haired man had simply faded away on the pavement.

Kennedy himself was in the shop, and in a couple of seconds Mr. Pell was through the counter and into the parlour beyond. Kennedy looked weary.

"Being early closing day, Ellen's gone into Ipswich to the pictures, sir," he said by way of explanation. "I'm just carrying on until we close."

"Yes. I saw her waiting for the bus," Mr. Pell answered. "Feeling better, isn't she, Kennedy?"

Kennedy thought for a moment.

"Well, sir, she does seem brighter at times, I must say," he observed slowly. "But I don't know, sir, I'm—well, I'm a little worried about her."

"Quite," said Mr. Pell briskly. "So am I. She's back at that old accursed game, Kennedy; but the point is—where does she get it?"

"That beats me flat, sir. In a little place like this, too! No, sir, I—I've been very troubled; the last few days particularly."

Mr. Pell looked at his watch.

"We've got to stop this infernal business, Kennedy," he said. "I'm going to start now—at once. I want your motor-bicycle and side-car."

"Thank you, sir." The man's normally expressionless face showed, just for a second, a flash of relief and gratitude. "If you will excuse me, sir?"

The shop door bell proclaimed the entry of a customer.

He was back in a few moments.

"The bicycle, sir? Exactly, sir." He looked distressed. Then, as if making a daring suggestion, he went on with an apologetic cough: "Would it be troubling you too much, sir, to get it out? You see, there's the shop——"

Mr. Pell jumped to his feet. "Why, of course," he said. "Where is it? In the yard?"

Kennedy bowed gravely. "You will find it all ready, sir," he said.

"Back soon," said Mr. Pell, with a friendly wave of the hand, and a few minutes later, attired in his servant's overalls and goggles, the little man was driving slowly through Chipping Langham's narrow main street.

Once clear of the place he let the bicycle go, and he passed the motor-omnibus that had brought him from Salthithe and was taking Ellen Kennedy to Ipswich, a mile outside that town.

Mr. Pell hurried by. At Ipswich he pushed the machine into a garage by the omnibus terminus, then wandered out to await the arrival of Ellen.

He watched her dismount, and unobtrusively followed her through the narrow streets of the centre of the town, until she led him, as he had anticipated, yet feared, towards the shop of the Albion Frock Company.

Mr. Pell, inconspicuous in his oil-stained overalls, loitered on the other side of the way. Ellen's earlier casual gait had grown more irregular. She would hurry for a hundred yards or so, then hesitate. As she approached the shop she showed signs of acute nervousness, glancing fearfully over her shoulder from time to time, stopping suddenly to look into a window, then dashing on with unnecessary haste.

Mr. Pell's expression grew more serious.

At the very door of the shop Ellen lingered just a moment before, with a seemingly sudden determination, she entered. Mr. Pell crossed the road quickly and glued his eyes to the adjoining window.

A few minutes later, Ellen bustled out and turned abruptly to the left. Mr. Pell went in pursuit.

The woman was walking with more assurance now. No longer did she cast those furtive glances behind her. Mr. Pell waited his opportunity. It came at a busy crossing. As if by chance, by a swift manœuvre he came face to face with her.

"Ah, Ellen," he said in a quiet, natural tone.

"We want you back at Langham. Things are moving; I borrowed Kennedy's bicycle to get here on the chance of finding you before you got to the cinema."

Ellen's face went pale. "Oh—oh yes, sir," she stammered.

"It's all right," said Mr. Pell with an ingenuous smile. "Come along. Sorry to interrupt your half-holiday, but we can't do without you, Ellen."

She had recovered, to some extent, her composure.

"Of course, sir," she answered respectfully. "But how lucky that you found me."

"Always trust your luck in a good cause," said Mr. Pell cheerily. "I've got the bicycle and side-car just round here; we'll be back before we know it."

In a perfectly matter-of-fact way he chatted with her on everyday subjects till they reached the garage. Ellen's first, so obvious, alarm had passed. She was apologetic for the trouble she was causing him.

"As long as I've found you, Ellen, it's all right," he laughed. "Now, there would have been something to be sorry for if I'd had to go through every picture palace in Ipswich before I got hold of you."

"Oh, sir!" she tittered.

They hardly exchanged half a dozen sentences on the way back, and when they reached the back entrance of the tobacco shop, Ellen was dozing in the side-car.

Mr. Pell pushed the bicycle through into the yard and followed her into the house. The place was very quiet, for Kennedy was upstairs in the wireless room.

Ellen started for the staircase. "You'll be going up, I suppose, sir. You'll let me know when I'm wanted."

Mr. Pell raised a detaining hand.

"Just a moment," he said sternly. "Ellen, what were you doing in that dress shop?"

The woman's eyes opened wide in fear, and she swayed unsteadily.

"The—the—the dress shop, sir?" she echoed almost in a whisper.

"Sit down, Ellen. The dress shop, I said." Mr. Pell's voice was grim.

She sank into a chair, her mouth twitching, and glanced frantically about the room as if seeking some means of escape.

"Well?" asked Mr. Pell.

"Oh—I—I just went there," she answered stupidly. "I—I——"

"Were you buying a dress?" Mr. Pell demanded in the same pitiless voice.

Ellen made an obvious effort to control herself.

"Oh no, sir. Oh no. It's—it's silly of me, I know, at my age, but—but—I went to—to get some—some face-powder, sir." There were signs of tears in her eyes, and she looked panic-stricken.

"Face-powder, eh?" said Mr. Pell very quietly. "Give me that powder, Ellen. At once now."

The sharpness of his tone brought an immediate obedience. With trembling hands, the tears now streaming from her eyes, Ellen opened her bag.

"Is that all?" Mr. Pell queried harshly, as he took the dainty packet she handed to him.

"Yes—yes, sir."

"Ellen, don't lie."

Quivering, she handed out another, without any retort to his hard words.

"Give me your bag."

She passed it over meekly, and he searched it.

"Ah," said Mr. Pell in a kinder voice, as he returned the bag to her, "you foolish, foolish girl! What is it—cocaine?"

"Y-yes," sobbed Ellen, breaking into a paroxysm of tears.

Mr. Pell looked at the packages in his hand. Innocent enough they looked with their simple lettering, 'Cœurs des Fleurs,' in palest pink upon an ivory background. He drew off his heavy gloves and opened one of the packets. Hidden in a mass of sweet-smelling face-powder was a tiny thin envelope which crunched as he pressed it carefully between his fingers.

The powder within was a foul, soul-killing drug.

Mr. Pell's voice was very tender when he turned to the hysterical woman by his side.

"I always know, Ellen," he said, speaking like a father to a wayward child. "I'm not going to blame you; I'm going to help you. We'll soon get over this."

Mr. Pell waited patiently until Ellen's sobbing began to subside.

"You know you needn't be afraid of me," he said at length. "Kennedy guessed just as I did, so it will be no news to him. Now tell me, Ellen, when did this start again?"

In a dazed sort of way she checked her tears and answered his question.

"It was soon after we came down here, sir; it was the cold and loneliness, I think, sir; I got low and miserable."

"And how did you find out where to get it?"

"It was a girl in the draper's here, sir. She's gone now, but she used to get some, and we got talking one day—and—well—that was it, sir."

"And have you always got it from Ipswich?"

Ellen nodded.

"What about just before Christmas, when you were so tired and nervous? Couldn't get any then, could you?"

The woman's eyes stared fearfully at this man who knew so much.

"No, sir," she faltered. "There were a few weeks when—when the person—was away. Oh, it was awful, sir."

"H'm!" commented Mr. Pell. "And it's going to be awful again, Ellen, but you're not going to have any more of this stuff. And you know you can't fool me."

Of deliberation he threw a threat into the words. Mr. Pell's knowledge of drug adicts was wide.

Ellen cringed. "Of course not," she murmured.

Apparently without pity, Mr. Pell extracted from Ellen a confession of how she secured the deadly powder, the manner in which you made known in the shop what you really sought. Ellen was firm, under cross-examination, in her repeated statement that only the foreign manageress sold the 'special' boxes of face-powder.

Mr. Pell saw when he had strained her endurance to its limit. "Better go up to your room now," he said gently. "I'll send Kennedy to you. But you needn't be afraid; he won't reproach you; he's too fond of you. Between us we'll get you all right again."

The woman climbed slowly up the stairs, sobbing as she went, and Mr. Pell followed, going on to the wireless room at the top of the house. There, Kennedy sat at a table, phones on his head, listening intently. Spread before him was a sheet of paper, upon which he had been making notes.

He rose to his feet, as his master entered, and removed the phones.

"Sir, there's——" he began, but Mr. Pell stopped him.

"Go down to your wife at once and comfort her," he said. "I've got it; it's cocaine. She's been buying it from the Albion Frock Company in Ipswich."

A swift expression of enlightenment crossed Kennedy's usually immobile face. Then there flashed a look of tragic grief.

"Oh, my God! I was afraid of it," he muttered. Then: "I'm sorry, sir," he apologized. "I'm very grateful to you, sir."

Mr. Pell smiled kindly.

"Don't worry too much, Kennedy," he said. "Now we know, we can get to work to cure her. Get her to bed if you can; then come back, and I'll telephone to Dr. Morgan. I'll get him to send one of his nurses up at once and take Ellen back. We must get her away immediately; that's the first job."

Kennedy bowed as if ashamed to betray the gratitude that showed so plainly in his eyes.

Mr. Pell picked up the head-phones idly. "I'll take over here for the time being," he said. "I shouldn't be surprised if we heard something to-day."

The man became the correct, mechanical servant in an instant.

"Yes, sir; as I was about to say, they are already at work. They've been testing on and off since one o'clock. It was Dyke that was speaking last, sir. You'll find the notes on the table."

## II.

An atmosphere of restlessness and indefinable expectancy pervaded The Warren before dinner that night.

The normal boredom that characterized the guests was absent; they spoke with greater interest to one another, as if hoping to hear some gossip, the justification for which was of the very slightest.

True, Dr. Adam looked distrait, and they all commented upon it. Michael Carteret, too, wore a preoccupied expression, but it was not until the meal started, and it was noticed that Mr. Pell's and Miss Gervoise's chairs were vacant, that anything really unusual could be defined.

Questions were addressed to Michael about the absent ones, but he could not satisfy the curiosity. Indeed, he was as much in the dark as the others and with more reason to worry; he badly wanted to see Mr. Pell to tell him of Rafe Adam's decision about his immediate departure.

Halfway through the meal, Alys Gervoise did appear, apparently having just arrived back in a peculiarly bad temper, for she flounced into her seat, still wearing her hat, her face dark as thunder.

Michael felt that some sort of remark was demanded of him, and he called across to her:

"Did you have a pleasant trip back?"

She turned, glared at him, and made no reply. The other guests sat up briskly; this was exciting. Michael shrugged his shoulders, involuntarily, and wondered what had happened. Evidently he had upset their plans very seriously. That was to the good, anyhow.

Late as she had arrived, Miss Gervoise left the table before the meal was finished, gathering together her gloves and bag, and sweeping out of the room with the air of a tragedy queen that ill-suited her very modern and masculine style.

After dinner Adam beckoned Michael to his study.

"What have you done to the beautiful Miss Gervoise?" he asked, with a playful frown. "She's simply furious with you, and me, and Ray. She threatens to leave at once, says that I'm a quack, and that this is not a reputable establishment, and—oh, well, lots more hysteria of the same kind."

He smiled, but his smile was not as he wished it to appear, that of tolerant amusement.

"I'm sorry," Michael answered; "I told you what happened, and I know no more. Why's she grumbling? She looks quite capable of taking care of herself."

Adam shook his head.

"Evidently she did not appreciate her *tête-à-tête* with Mr. Ray," he said. "But she blames you mostly. They were delayed first by your desertion, then they seem to have had trouble with the launch. But I suppose she'll be over it in the morning."

Michael scanned the doctor's face carefully as he was speaking. There was some subtlety behind all this, but what, he could not divine. He changed the subject suddenly.

"And where's our Mr. Pell?" he laughed. "I thought, when they were both missing, that attachment had blossomed into romance."

Adam responded lightly, but without much conviction. The man was palpably harassed.

"He telephoned from Langham that he'd missed his bus and was dining there. I sometimes suspect Mr. Pell of a secret love of cinemas or some such excitement, he's so frequently going into Ipswich. Personally, I prefer Salthithe."

Michael became instantly alert. "Queer chap, Pell," he said in a contemplative way, pulling a cigarette case casually from his pocket. "Who is he, doctor? What do you know about him, if it isn't giving away trade secrets? I've seen quite a lot of the little man and, frankly, I like him."

Adam looked up slowly, and with a puzzled light in his eyes.

"Only that he's Mr. Bernard Pell, who lived most of his life in the East. A Dr. Morgan of Hampstead sent him to me. Morgan's a biggish man on drugs.

I've often wondered—— Tell me, what do you make of him, Carteret?"

Rafe Adam got up and went across to the sideboard. "Just one peg as a night-cap?" he asked.

"Thanks. Just a wee one."

The doctor mixed two drinks, a pretty stiff one for himself and a weaker one for Michael. "I suppose he sometimes talks of other subjects but birds?" he laughed.

Michael noted with joy that his bait had been swallowed. Adam was going to pump him about Mr. Pell, and in the process Michael intended to find out how much Adam—and the smugglers—suspected, or did not suspect, about this quiet little man who was working to bring about their ruin. The prospect of the task excited him.

"Oh, Lord, yes," he said easily. "He talks, and talks well, on every subject under the sun once you head him off his little fowls."

"You're lucky," said Adam. "I've never got him interested in anything but his symptoms, geese, and mild scandal."

"Ah, he is fond of scandal, I admit," Michael retorted.

Again Adam took the bait, and Michael had a joyous time plying the doctor with entirely imaginary tales of Mr. Pell's weakness for gossip. Adam's questions became more and more leading, and Michael's answers more and more untrue. When the doctor sought to insinuate the Seymours into the conversation, Michael became loquacious. Mr. Pell was most indignant with the Major, he announced, for keeping Molly shut up in a God-forsaken spot like the Grange.

"The little man has an eye for the ladies, you know, doctor," he said knowingly.

Michael went to his room at last, satisfied that Rafe

Adam, though curious, was not really suspicious of Mr. Pell. He retained, too, an impression that Adam was most uneasy and rattled. The man had had four pegs to his two, and big ones, too. He was showing it towards the end, and all too anxious, as he remarked, apropos nothing in particular: "You'll be getting off by the morning train to-morrow, I suppose. I'll have the car ready for you," as Michael bade him good-night.

"If you say so—I must," he answered.

"I do say so," said Adam positively. "Entirely in your own interests, my dear fellow. For my part, I shall be sorry."

"Very nice of you, doctor," Michael replied. "Good-night."

He went slowly up to his room, deep in thought. It was clear that they meant to get him out of the way, and he saw no means of countering their design. What on earth had befallen Mr. Pell? For the first time he felt a touch of nervousness. Had anything happened to him?

He pushed open his door and turned on the light. Mr. Pell himself rose from the armchair by the fire.

"S-s-h! Shut the door, Carteret; I am glad you've come," said Mr. Pell in a low voice. "I waited for you here to save trouble. Things are moving."

## III.

Mr. Pell's complete unconcern infected Michael; he hardly felt surprised to find the man, about whose whereabouts he had been so anxious but a few moments before, seated, waiting for him in his own room.

"Things are moving here, too," he answered, quietly crossing over to the fire. "Adam's ordered me away to-morrow morning——"

"What a stroke of luck!" Mr. Pell interrupted. "They're playing right into our hands." He smiled with satisfaction.

"Luck!" echoed Michael blandly.

"Of the very best," Mr. Pell retorted. "But tell me your news first."

Michael surrendered to the dominance of the amazing little man, and obeyed without further question. Mr. Pell chuckled, as he heard of the incident at the Palace Hotel.

"And you just left 'em? Bolted and said nothing about it at all?" he asked, smiling broadly.

"Yes. I thought it couldn't do any harm, anyhow."

"Harm? Why, it's a master-stroke! Carteret, we couldn't have devised anything better."

"But why?" Michael felt that things were altogether beyond him. He was, he knew, a mere puppet dancing at the pull of hidden strings.

"Tell me about the boat," said Mr. Pell, ignoring the question.

Michael described the launch in detail, its bizarre colouring—grey with a brilliant red stripe—its cosy cabin—"Big enough to stow away a dozen cargoes," he said. The noisy engines, the out-board motor.

Mr. Pell listened, gazing fixedly into the fire.

"They daren't take the risk of using a craft like that," he commented when Michael finished. "Yet I'll take no chances. We have got to watch *Jaz Jaz* for the next night or two; watch her closely."

For some time they discussed the subject, Mr. Pell putting in frequent, abrupt, shrewd questions, and Michael answering as best he could, and seldom with any clear idea of at what, exactly, his mysterious companion was driving.

At length he asked: "But what about to-morrow? Where do I come in if I have to go up to town?"

Mr. Pell looked up with a gleam of real amusement in his brown eyes.

"You come in for a good deal—hard work mostly. But you do not go to town—at least, I hope not." He became more grave and spoke with the easy courtesy of one issuing a perfectly commonplace invitation. "I want you to be my guest, if you will, for the next few days. It will help very much in our common purpose if you will accept. In fact, Carteret, you must accept—unless you want to see that little girl of Seymour's in trouble."

Michael raised his head quickly, and looked across at Mr. Pell with a dangerously belligerent glare.

"I've taken a tremendous lot on trust from you," he said in a steady, low voice. "But we've come to a point, now. Do you give me your word that you *are* trying to save the Seymours from trouble?"

Mr. Pell met his challenging eyes unflinchingly.

"I am, perhaps, more interested in that than you are. I give you my word," he said quietly, "I give you the word of Berkley Morgan—that may or may not mean anything to you. But Adam has reference books in which you can turn him up. And any man who knows the East will tell you that I have reason to be proud of what my word meant—and means—to millions East of Suez."

"Sir Berkley Morgan!" Michael repeated the name in amazement. He knew it well enough. Berkley Morgan was a tradition; almost a myth, like Kipling's 'Strickland.' He was the man who had gone to India years before Michael was born, and, they said, had been absorbed by the Orient. Had become more Oriental than the Orientals.

A mystery man was Berkley Morgan, for thirty years known mostly to the world as the man who was lent by the British Government to Native States to organize modern police services.

Rajahs had honoured him and heaped wealth upon him. Japan knew his fame and feared him. From some indefinite headquarters in Eastern China he had performed work, before the fall of the Empire, that had done much to cleanse the trade centres of criminals, native and European.

"You are Berkley Morgan?" Michael gasped, humbly, apologetically.

"I confess my dreadful identity as an earnest of good faith," said Mr. Pell with just a flicker of a smile.

'By Gad, sir!" said Michael, "if you'd only told me that weeks ago I would have helped you a good deal more."

"The help I needed was given best by an honest man who didn't quite trust me. You see, Carteret, you're too honest—for a policeman. Now, what about to-morrow?"

"I'm under your orders, sir," said Michael. "What am I to do?"

Mr. Pell explained in detail.

## IV.

It was not Rafe Adam's car that took Michael to the station the next morning.

The doctor, seemingly thoroughly upset, explained at breakfast time:

"Miss Gervoise meant what she said; she's going. I had to offer her the car, and as she's even more acid in her comments on you than on me, I thought perhaps you would as soon not travel together. You can dodge her on the train, at any rate." He smiled wearily.

"Don't worry," said Michael. "I'm sorry about this. The local cab will do for me."

"I knew you wouldn't mind," said Adam, with relief. "Thank goodness it was Sark who sent her to me—he'll understand. It makes you realize Sark's hard manner isn't altogether unjustified, doesn't it?"

"It does," Michael replied with a grin.

He went upstairs to finish his packing. Wet weather clothes Mr. Pell had instructed him to take.

Rafe Adam's story of Alys Gervoise did not impress him in the least. As he had told Mr. Pell the night before, it was pretty obvious she was in with Adam.

But it only occurred to him, as he drove to the station, that Alys Gervoise was undoubtedly told off to watch him up to London. The thought staggered him. This would upset the whole arrangement he had made to go to Kennedy's.

Here was a problem, and a serious one, too. What a fool not to see through the ruse at once! He looked at his watch. They were close up to time; ten minutes delay might miss the train. He did not hesitate.

"Pull up!" he called, his head out of the window. The car stopped.

"Sorry, but I've got to go back. I've left all my money behind," he said with a sheepish grin.

The driver murmured: "That won't do, sir," and turned the car.

Michael let him run on for ten minutes before he thrust his head through the opened window again.

"It's all right," he called, "I've found it. So silly of me. Go on to Langham; if I miss this train I'll wait there for the next."

Once more the car turned.

They were yet half a mile from Langham Station when Michael heard, with delight, the sharp whistle and the puff-puff of the departing train. He had eluded the spying Alys, at any rate.

At the station he put his bags, as instructed by Mr. Pell, into the cloak-room, and wandered, to pass the time, into the town.

Very nervous, as he reached Kennedy's shop, he looked up and down the street before pushing open the door. He almost ran into the place. Kennedy, Mr. Pell had said, would be there expecting him.

But Kennedy was not there. Crop-haired Miss Alys Gervoise was behind the counter.

"Come along, Mr. Carteret," she said with a wonderful smile as she lifted the counter-flap. "We were wondering what had happened to you. You'll find Mr. Kennedy inside."

Instinctively he hesitated. Alys Gervoise in this place could only mean one of two things. Either Mr. Pell had most shamelessly betrayed him, or Mr. Pell himself had been completely outwitted.

Miss Gervoise's eyes glinted with amusement.

"Come on, Mr. Carteret, quick, please," she said.

Automatically Michael obeyed. Miss Gervoise followed him into the parlour.

"Mr. Carteret, thank you," she laughed as the door closed. "Sir Berkley warned me to be very careful of you, and, at least, you can tell him that I played my part well."

Michael felt bewildered; still, he could not adjust his sense of values. He was irritable, as a man is who has to admit to himself that he has been entirely gulled. But he recovered something of his native *savoir faire*.

"If you will tell me what your part has been, I can, with sincerity, express my admiration in words," he replied suavely.

Kennedy, standing by with a rather shocked expression on his face, broke in:

"Miss Gervoise, sir, has been assisting my master with the little affair in hand," he announced with the gravity of a bishop. "Sir Berkley did say that you might be a—a trifle surprised. But I was to assure you, sir, that it was quite all right."

At the summons of the shop bell, Alys Gervoise bolted from the parlour.

"And would you be pleased to see your room now, sir?" asked Kennedy in his emotionless voice.

"I'd be pleased to do anything that would explain to me exactly what is happening," said Michael blankly.

"Exactly, sir. Sir Berkley—er—that is, Mr. Pell, sir, will be here shortly. The room, sir; this way, if you please. Your luggage I will have brought from the station if you will give me the ticket, sir."

Kennedy appeared as unperturbed as though the advent of Michael Carteret into a small tobacconist's shop in a side street in Chipping Langham were his long-heralded arrival at a placid country house.

Michael surrendered. Whatever the explanation of this mystery might be, obviously he must await the arrival of Mr. Pell.

"All right, Kennedy; lead on," he said, with a resigned gesture.

The man conducted him to Mr. Pell's own room at the top of the house.

"And would there be anything you would like, sir? A glass of sherry, perhaps?" he asked, with the ghost of a bow.

"I'd like a large whisky," Michael declared with conviction.

The man disappeared silently, and Michael gazed about the room. A cheery fire burned in the tiny grate, and morning papers were laid out neatly on a small table by the side of the solitary armchair. Mr. Pell, last night, had spoken of a shop kept by an old servant of his, but he had not suggested any such comfortable accommodation, nor had he breathed a word of Alys Gervoise's connection with the place.

Kennedy returned with a decanter of whisky and a siphon on a tray, and Michael poured himself out a stiffish peg. "Now, for Heaven's sake, Kennedy, tell me what this is all about," he demanded, as he drained the glass.

"This, sir," said Kennedy with a wooden smile, "is what we might call General Headquarters."

"And Miss Gervoise?"

Kennedy stroked an imaginary beard upon a perfectly shaven chin. "Miss Gervoise, sir, might be described as Intelligence," he answered. "Sir Berkley—that is Mr. Pell—employed her services to deal with a certain Mr. Ray. A very winning way has Miss Gervoise, if I may say so, sir. At the moment she is supplied to me to assist in the shop in the absence of my wife, sir, and I may say that, for a lady, she is doing remarkably well. She sees the funny side of things, does that lady."

Michael smiled ruefully. He had been one of the funny things she had seen, he realized.

"Well, I tell you frankly, Kennedy, she fooled me absolutely," he admitted.

"So the master was hoping, sir," said Kennedy with as much expression as though he were serving a boiled egg.

His fears and suspicions past, Michael felt a sense of exhilaration. "What do I do now?" he asked.

"Sir—that is, Mr. Pell—thought you might like to amuse yourself with the wireless, sir. If you would feel inclined——"

"Carry on," said Michael cheerfully. "I'm in your hands, Kennedy."

## V.

Mr. Pell found Michael listening intently to nothing but vague atmospherics, and occasional spluttering Morse, when he arrived a couple of hours later.

"Carteret, I know I owe you a score of apologies," he said with his mysterious smile, "but it had to be. We're really at grips with these people now; and Alys Gervoise was a very necessary part of the plan."

"But I would like to know what part," Michael answered in a hopeless way.

Mr. Pell plumped into a chair.

"She has it from Mr. Arthur Ray's own lips that the run is to-night," he said quietly.

"To-night!" Michael exclaimed in excitement. "How on earth did she find that out?"

"By saying her father taught her," said Mr. Pell enigmatically.

Michael frowned in annoyance.

"Look here—er—Mr. Pell," he retorted, "isn't it time I was told something about this business? I'm not quite a fool, you know."

Mr. Pell was bland. "My dear fellow," he said, "it is exactly the time. I'm going to tell you. Alys Gervoise is one of the cleverest inquiry agents in the world. I know, because I trained her. I cabled to New York for her. I wanted her for a special purpose."

"What was that?" asked Michael.

"To 'vamp' our Mr. Ray," said Mr. Pell with a grin.

Michael's eyebrows lifted. He saw it all now—the luck of his chance leaving of Ray and Miss Gervoise alone at Oldford, the explanation of her row with Adam, her presence in this house.

"I had observed," said Mr. Pell, "that the smuggling community, which is amazing widespread in this district, had a sort of password by which they knew one another. Haven't you been asked once or twice if you were interested in chess by any chance?"

"Good Lord, yes! A score of times. But you don't mean to say——" A dozen memories came flooding to Michael's mind.

Mr. Pell's amused smile broadened.

"Kennedy found the answer on Christmas Day at the Suffolk Punch," he said. "It is: 'Not much, though my father did teach me when I was young.' That's what Miss Gervoise told Ray. And she also told him that she was deputed by—by their master—to watch both Mr. Ray and the Seymours. She incidentally suggested that she had fallen a victim to Mr. Ray's undoubted charms." The little man smiled. "And—well, he fell a victim to hers. He gave the whole show away. The run takes place to-night. The cargo is to lie at Dyke, to be sent away in vans that are to bring additional furniture to the farm."

"Well, I'll be damned!" said Michael fervently.

"The idea," said Mr. Pell dryly, "is to damn somebody quite different—a much more deserving case."

Michael looked up with a smile, to see a relentless, ominous Mr. Pell, from whose face all shadow of amusement had fled. It rather frightened him.

"What's the next move?" he asked quickly.

Mr. Pell sat forward in his chair. "Primarily I want that cargo landed; and when it is landed I want that cargo. Understand that, Carteret. Now I want you . . ."

Mr. Pell detailed his scheme in sharp, incisive sentences. Listening intently, Michael was filled with admiration for the little man.

And as soon as darkness had fallen over the dreary, January landscape of East Suffolk that afternoon, Michael and Kennedy set out, in motor-bicycle and side-car, for a lonely spot on the high ground of Holm Common, some three miles away from Dyke Farm.

# CHAPTER XII

## I.

THE task allotted to Michael was to watch Dyke, to satisfy himself that the cargo really was landed, and, in the event of an unexpected attempt to remove it that night, so to alarm the smugglers that they would abandon their scheme.

"The time has come for fighting in the open now," Mr. Pell had said, giving his last words of instructions. "They'll know by to-morrow that the game's up. I expect we've had our last meal together at The Warren, you and I, Carteret. Use your discretion; threaten them with the police if the worst comes to the worst."

It had all seemed very simple, as Mr. Pell had stated it up in that snug wireless room at Chipping Langham, but out on the bleak moorland of Holm Common, on a pitch-black night, with the sound of Kennedy's motor-cycle fading away in the distance, Michael was conscious of an extraordinary thrill of apprehension as he trudged along towards the Dyke road.

He moved silently, but with none too great ease, for his legs were encased in high rubber boots that would be more useful later on when he sought the shelter of the muddy ditches.

A cold, driving drizzle began to fall, adding to the discomfort of the walk, and the darkness was so intense that you could not see the edge of the road from its centre.

Stealthily, and with every sense alert, Michael neared the farm. By the dip in the ground where, on that other night, he had heard Molly's challenging whisper through the fog, Michael adopted the same course that he had taken then. He leapt the bordering ditch and took to the field, moving swiftly until he came to that broad dyke that fringed the footpath from the farm to the hardway.

Here, before, he had watched the smugglers at work, and here, again, he hoped for the same fortune. Crouching low, he glanced towards the farm. A light gleamed invitingly from one of the lower windows, but that was the only sign of habitation the silent house gave.

Michael found himself as dry a spot as he could behind a tall clump of reeds that swayed and soughed in the rising wind, and sat down to wait, ready at the first sign of alarm to slip into the shelter of the dyke itself.

He glanced at his wrist-watch. The pale, luminous hands showed it to be just after seven. He had, possibly, five hours to wait in this bleak spot, for, as Mr. Pell had computed it, the tide would not permit of the run taking place after midnight.

Michael's instructions were to rendezvous at the place where Kennedy had dropped him, as soon after twelve as possible. He pulled a flask from his pocket and took a welcome gulp of hot coffee. He wanted to smoke, but he dared not, lest the light of his match or the scent of the tobacco betray his hiding-place.

Half an hour passed with leaden minutes. Then a light flashed out as somebody opened the door at Dyke, and presently the sound of footsteps came to his ears. With heart beating swifter he slid quietly into the dyke.

The rustling reeds swished about his head when, a few minutes later, two men passed within a few yards of him. One, who muttered distastefully:

"Pah! What a foul night. Do you think it's safe?" he recognized as Ray. The other, who replied in the country accent "Quite safe, sir," he could not place.

Michael frowned. This was unexpected. What on earth was Ray doing, actively, in this business? Ray didn't look the sort of man for a dangerous and hardy task.

Only a moment or two later Michael jumped. The noise of Mr. Ray's motor-boat split the air. The engine settled down to a duller note, then grew fainter as, evidently, it set out into the harbour.

Michael pulled himself back to the bank, puzzled. What did this mean, this open careering about Walm Harbour in that noisy launch? Was this a mere blind? He listened. Still distinct, yet fainter, rising and swelling through the gusty wind like the engines of some big aeroplane high up, Mr. Ray's launch made her presence known for miles around.

Soon the detonations faded, and silence came upon the dark world again. Later, very faintly, he heard the noise once more, then it vanished for good. Michael raised himself stealthily to get a clearer view of the farm. It was in darkness now. A feeling of dismay flooded him. Things were not working out according to plan.

Cold and stiff, he sought his flask again, then munched a sandwich, wondering.

Nine o'clock came; ten, and still no sign of life anywhere. Michael's spirits had sunk to zero. Something had gone wrong. As the hands of his watch neared eleven, he decided to reconnoitre. He groped his way towards the landing-place and peered into the gloom. Already the tide had ebbed far, and the slimy stones led him between wide banks of mud before he reached the lapping water of the harbour.

All was desolate and solitary here. Only the plash of the waves and the moaning, gusty wind, as it swept in from the open sea, broke the silence.

Baffled and dispirited, he walked openly back along the murky pathway towards the farm. It seemed folly to hide in a night of impenetrable gloom in so utterly deserted a world. He found a gate and hoisted himself on to it, giving himself up to moody surmise.

What did this failure portend? How would it affect Pell's plans—and Molly? Who had blundered?

Half-past eleven showed on the ghostly dial of the watch. It was obviously foolish to wait any longer.

Slowly he began to make for the rendezvous. He passed Dyke and peered over the gate. The house was still as the grave, and without a gleam of light. He turned away along the deserted road, past the dip by the stream where he had taken to the field, then, glad to be active once more, and keen to stir the blood in his chilled body, he broke into a run.

He was still a mile from his destination when a sharp flash of light on the road ahead brought him to a sudden halt. He stopped motionless.

The light flashed again, this time nearer to him, and, remembering Mr. Pell's instructions that the time for secrecy was passed, he called out boldly: "Good-night."

It was Mr. Pell himself who replied.

"That you, Carteret?" he said, with more excitement in his voice than Michael had ever heard before. "What kept you? I've been expecting you for the last hour. Everything all right, eh?"

Michael was dumbfounded.

"All right?" he exclaimed. "What do you mean? Absolutely nothing has happened so far as I am concerned. The place is deserted——"

"What!" Mr. Pell cried in consternation. "Do you mean to say they've not landed the stuff?"

"Not a thing; there's been no sign of life round Dyke for the past four hours," Michael answered bitterly.

Mr. Pell gave a long, low whistle.

"Gad! They've fooled us," he said after a moment. "They've run that stuff somewhere to-night. Kennedy's tapped their wireless, and Dyke was talking up to ten o'clock."

"It can't have been Dyke; I was there," Michael protested with chagrin.

"Not inside the house," said Mr. Pell dryly.

Michael swore mildly to himself.

"They started talking soon after you left—I heard them. Our Miss Molly was in Dyke then," Mr. Pell continued.

"Good Lord!" said Michael in disgust.

"Another voice came in soon after Kennedy got back—their boat some miles out at sea talking open language. They reckoned to be off the harbour mouth by eight o'clock."

"Ray went off in his motor-boat making noise enough to wake the dead just before that," Michael interrupted.

"I know," Mr. Pell went on. "He went across to dine at the Grange; Adam was there, too—I met him starting off when I got back. He drew my attention to Ray's boat and made a joke about it. You could hear it plainly at Salthithe about a quarter to eight."

"But don't you think there's something significant in that?" Michael asked hopefully.

"I did rather, and I took the opportunity of examining her when she got back to her moorings. There was nothing suspicious aboard her then. That was about ten o'clock. There's something behind it, undoubtedly, but what?"

"Do you think they've run the stuff at the Grange?"

"That's quite possible." Mr. Pell spoke in a preoccupied way. "But they must have been most suspicious to make this move. You were apparently safely away; I don't think they suspected me. We're up against a cunning brain, Carteret."

"What are you going to do now?" asked Michael.

"Send you back to Langham in the side-car and get back to The Warren myself."

"But won't you be spotted?"

Mr. Pell laughed shortly.

"Oh, I know how to get in," he said; "I've made quite a habit of midnight walks since I've been down here."

They had reached the rendezvous, but there was no sign of Alys Gervoise. Michael commented on the fact.

"It's all right," said Mr. Pell. "When you didn't turn up I sent her back to Kennedy to see if anything had developed. She goes the long way round to keep clear of the neighbourhood; she will be back soon."

He lapsed into a thoughtful silence, but puzzled and sore as he was at the failure, Michael was tremendously sorry for the little man. He seemed overwhelmed by the fruitless result of his labours.

They found some sort of shelter, from the driving rain, in a small sand-pit just off the road, and Michael pulled a pipe from his pocket with satisfaction.

Mr. Pell seemed to come back from a dream.

"But I haven't thanked you yet for what you've done," he said, with a poor attempt at levity. "I'm afraid you're pretty cold and wet."

"It's nothing," Michael replied.

Mr. Pell whistled softly an old-fashioned air popular in the 'nineties. He had gone back to his thoughts. "But you suffered in a good cause," he said with seeming irrelevance, after a silence of some minutes. "I'll tell you a story, Carteret; it may help you to understand things."

He shifted his position, and a brisker note came into his voice. "I left one of the jolliest houses man ever saw, a life that suited me down to the ground, a climate that pleased me, and a race I understood, to come back to England to do what I hoped to do to-night. I was living in Japan this time last year," he announced.

"Yes." Michael could barely hide his excitement. At last, he knew, he was to hear Mr. Pell's story.

"There were lots of reasons why I should never come back to this country. I'd been away too long, for one thing. Then there were family reasons. But that's what brought me back in the end.

"Carteret, I've been dealing with crime in one form or another practically all my life. You know that, of course. Things perhaps don't shock me as they would other people; one grows callous, to regard the criminal as a specimen, to put him under the microscope, as it were, to look for the causes that led to the results, so that one may fight the causes. And the main cause in the East is drug taking."

Michael nodded. "So I have heard," he said. "It's like drunkenness over here."

"Quite. Well, in my last summer in Japan, that splendid fellow, Kennedy, who'd been my butler for twenty years, had a terrible blow. His wife Ellen, who was my English cook, started drugging. It nearly broke the poor chap. He kept it from me for a time, but I found out, and when Ellen heard that, she bolted—the poor, wretched woman thought I was going to put her in gaol, I think.

"Kennedy and I searched the big towns for weeks before we found her, and by then she was in a pitiable condition. But we got her out of a low-class opium den, and we took with her another Englishwoman, a woman of gentle birth, who had sunk lower than Ellen herself."

Mr. Pell's voice grew suddenly hard and defiant.

"Carteret, when we got that poor woman home—I discovered that she was—my own sister."

"Your sister!" Michael gasped.

"My only sister. Heaven alone knows what hells she had been through. We fought for those two women's bodies and souls for weeks. There was a doctor cousin of mine, Francis Morgan, visiting in Hong-Kong at the time. He specializes in drug cases, and I cabled for him. We pulled Ellen Kennedy through all right—or we hoped so. My sister—I realize now it was most merciful—she died. Pneumonia got her, and she went out in twenty-four hours."

"This is—is terribly sad," Michael said, moved by the obvious distress the confession caused his companion.

"Life is apt to be sad," Mr. Pell said with a harsh laugh. "But I come to my point now, Carteret. Before my sister died, I got from her the truth, or most of it. It was pathetic. It began in the old, old way—I already knew of that—an uncongenial marriage. Then a craving for excitement, wild bursts of gaiety, followed by weeks of boredom.

"She had a bad nervous breakdown, and insomnia, depression, and all the things that go with it. Now, here's a thing you'll hardly credit, but it's true. Her husband put her under the care of a very well-known doctor, and she was in a nursing home of his for three months. She came out a confirmed drug adict."

"Not—not Adam?" Michael said harshly.

Mr. Pell went on : "That fiend not only taught her the use of dope—cunningly, oh, don't imagine that he did anything that would let suspicion fall on him—but he made sure she should never get well. Every few months she had to go back to that home for another treatment. He's had hundreds of wretched men and women through his hands whom he has treated in the same way.

"Think what it means in money to a beast of that kind. A steady income of hundreds a week from nursing homes of which he was the real proprietor. That apart from his other fees. Well, in the end my poor sister's morale had practically gone. I don't want to bore you with details, but, after a hideous life for a year or two, she bolted with some fool of a man. He deserted her as soon as he found out her trouble. Then the war came. That steadied her for a bit, but not for long. She was nursing in Egypt. There was some trouble in the hospital, and she cleared out and drifted East . . . and, well, I found her."

Mr. Pell got up abruptly, and although he could hardly see him, Michael could sense the inexorable hatred that possessed him. He threw out his words jerkily.

"I came home sworn to break that devil to shreds," he said. "He's the mind behind this smuggling business. It isn't the silk I care a rap about—it's the drugs they're bringing in with it."

Michael let out an exclamation of horror and surprise, but Mr. Pell checked him.

"It's taken me months to get to the truth of this thing. I never suspected the smuggling for a long time. I went for one of the brute's nursing homes—and that led me to The Warren. I was puzzled, because, although I knew something was wrong there, what my sister told me of didn't seem to be going on.

Then, little by little, I came to it. Sophie Vizard—a nice little hell-cat—she helped me. You confused me for a time; I thought the beast had got a hold over you; he was evidently trying. But by dint of much watching of birds, and the eternal patience the Orient taught me, and some luck, I traced the whole foul business.

"I haven't worked alone in this, my dear chap," he said, as if apologizing for a certain boastfulness. "You've helped me a lot. My cousin Francis has done much at the London end. He got Ray traced for me. And Kennedy—Kennedy has worked like a hero. I set him up in that tobacconist's shop last October, shortly after I discovered Seymour and Molly fixing a temporary aerial at Dyke just after sunrise on a misty morning. I never found their wireless room there, but I think it's somewhere in the big chimney."

Swift memories of the eerie sounds he had heard issuing from that chimney flashed into Michael's mind.

"They ran one cargo towards the end of the month, a small one. Then you turned up to complicate matters. But you gave me the tip about the Albion Frock Company."

"I remember, but how exactly——"

"That's how they sell their silks—and their drugs," said Mr. Pell laconically.

Michael scrambled to his feet.

"You don't mean to say that?" he demanded.

"I do. From half their branches, women in the know can get—special face-powder, if you please. I caught poor Ellen Kennedy at it at Ipswich only yesterday."

"Pell, this is monstrous—diabolic!" Michael exclaimed in anger. "But the Seymours—for God's sake don't tell me Molly Seymour knows what she's doing."

Mr. Pell's voice grew suddenly gentle. "God forbid," he said quietly, "because for a long time I've seen what you feel about Molly. And now I'm going to tell you what only I and my cousin Francis know in this world."

Instinctively Michael stiffened, as if to prepare himself for a blow.

"That poor woman who died in my home, my sister, was Molly's mother," said Mr. Pell in a voice that betrayed an infinite sadness.

It took Michael an appreciable time for the tremendous significance of those few words to sink into his brain.

Little Mr. Pell, Molly's uncle! The famous Sir Berkley Morgan using the whole of his mighty intellect to bring vengeance upon an unspeakable scoundrel, yet fearing all the time to bring disgrace and ruin to his own kin!

Gad, how clear it was all becoming now! Mr. Pell's enigmatic references to his desire to save the Seymours. His so reasonable doubts and fears. His amazing patience. And now the bitterness of his disappointment.

Stupidly, like a man half awake, Michael murmured: "You are Molly's uncle?"

"I wanted you to understand," said Mr. Pell quietly.

In a sudden reaction Michael felt an irresistible call to defend Molly.

"I'd stake my life she knows nothing about this drug business," he stated with heat. "Look here, Pell, I tell you something now I've never told you before. That girl's miserable. Someone's bringing pressure to bear on her to do what she's doing. She liked the excitement at first, but I'm sure—I'd take my oath on it—she's sickened with it now.

"I've only half told you what I know of Molly. She's straight as a die. That afternoon at Oldford . . ."

Simply and frankly he recounted every incident of that drive.

"And I as good as told her that I loved her—and I do," he said defiantly.

"We talked this smuggling over several times—absolutely straight," he went on. "I begged her to chuck it, but she laughed at me. But she never knew what was really behind it. Don't you think that for a moment."

Mr. Pell listened, as Michael had listened, with hardly a comment.

"There's nothing but sheer devilment in her share of the affair," he added. "And I don't believe the Major knows, either. Why, the first night I came here she saved my life."

"I knew," said Mr. Pell. "After she took you to the ferry she went back and packed part of a cargo in that car. She rowed over the next morning and drove it away quite openly. I saw her start."

Faintly through the night came the sound of a motor.

"Here's Miss Gervoise at last," Mr. Pell said with his old unconcern. "Well, Carteret, let the night bring counsel. You go back to bed, and I'll be over in the course of the morning."

But Michael felt no weariness now; he was wide awake, his brain active. His mind was filled with half-defined plans. So many questions had to be answered, so many problems tackled.

"It's no good my going back to Langham," he said eagerly. "I shan't sleep. I want to be doing something. Whatever we have to do, the sooner we get on to it the better. I've a mind to go and prowl round the Grange if Miss Gervoise can run me over there."

Mr. Pell flashed his torch, and Miss Gervoise drew up her bicycle a few yards from them.

"Let's see if there is any report," he said. "I like your spirit, Carteret."

Alys Gervoise called to them through the darkness.

"Sorry I'm late; Dyke was talking again, and Kennedy thought I'd better wait until he was satisfied they'd finished," she said.

"Dyke again!" exclaimed Mr. Pell. "What did they say?"

The woman, grimy and workmanlike, clad in Kennedy's useful overalls, produced a paper. "He sent the message here," she answered.

Michael and Mr. Pell peered over the writing by the light of the electric torch.

"The young lady was calling again soon after half-past eleven," Kennedy had written. "She did not use the code, but said: 'He's gone at last. Send a boat over; I'm tired.'"

"Then she knew I was there!" Michael muttered in consternation.

"Looks like it," said Mr. Pell.

They read on. "A man's voice acknowledged," Kennedy continued, "and since then to time of sending—12.30 a.m.—no further sound."

"Damn!" said Michael vigorously. "Then I blundered. Yet I could have sworn there was nobody about." The torch flashed upwards and showed Mr. Pell's tired face wrinkled in thought.

"But if that cargo's been landed to-night I'm going to find it for you," Michael went on in a determined voice. "It's time to take long chances, Pell, and I'm going to take one. I'm going over to the Grange to tell the Seymours the truth. And I'll lay every cent I have in the world, when Molly knows what she's really been running, she'll fight for us. Can you imagine that girl willingly helping in this horrible traffic?"

"Thank God I can't," said Mr. Pell earnestly. "You're right, Carteret. Go. And I'll come with you."

## II.

Mr. Pell did not return to The Warren after all. Alys Gervoise took him and Michael back to Langham, and, indefatigable woman that she was, disappeared into Ellen's kitchen to produce, as if by magic, a savoury dish of eggs that, for his part, Michael devoured ravenously.

It was a queer scene, that little parlour at the back of the shop, there in the early hours of a winter morning.

Michael, still with stains of the marshland mud about his clothes, his eyes dark-rimmed with fatigue, yet bright with excitement, sat facing Mr. Pell, in crumpled tweeds, his grizzled hair more badger-like than ever, his keen face alive, yet weary and shrivelled, so that the round horn spectacles gave him a quaint, owlish appearance.

At the head of the table, Alys Gervoise, in unquenchable good spirits, told, for Michael's benefit, the story of the 'vamping' of Mr. Ray. Despite her gaiety, she looked tired out, and, devoid of make-up, Michael realized that she was a hard-bitten woman fully ten years older than he had imagined.

She spoke of Ray in professional manner. "A natural crook, Mr. Carteret," she commented, "but a poor one. Gullible and nervous. I don't know what they are thinking of to drag him into this job. He's terrified of the loneliness of that farm; he told me so. And he was scared to death of me when I said I was sent down to watch him. Never even queried it, and forgot to flirt for some time."

Uncomfortable at the far end of the table, Kennedy sat expressionless as always, speaking only when addressed, and then with thoughtful dignity. He, alone, showed no sign of the tremendous strain that had been upon them all for hours past. His solemn "When would you be liking the bicycle got ready, sir?" to Mr. Pell—as if he were asking, "Will you take sherry or madeira, sir?"—nearly upset Miss Gervoise's gravity.

"We'll leave at six," said Mr. Pell as gravely.

A wan, pastel dawn was breaking from over the North Sea when Mr. Pell and Michael dropped from the high ground of Hithe Heath towards the outlying cottages of Street. A few labourers going to work gazed curiously at the motor-cycle as it dashed by.

Mr. Pell pulled up at the gate of the Grange.

"Better tackle them alone first, Carteret," he said. "I'll wait here; send for me when I'm wanted."

Anxious now, and disquieted, Michael made his way along the gloomy, shrub-bordered path. A dog barked, and out of the evergreens a frightened bird fluttered protestingly.

The house was in darkness, and Michael's heart nearly failed him. It was no easy task, which confronted him, to knock up this sleeping place before sunrise on such a mission. But it had to be done. To get it over quickly he hammered noisily upon the door.

A light showed through the graceful Georgian fanlight almost at once. There was a rattle of chains and a pulling back of bolts, and Major Seymour himself opened the door.

He looked grey and old in his dressing-gown, and he started back in alarm as he recognized his caller.

"Carteret!" he said in amazement. "What——" His voice changed to an utterly unconvincing note of easy surprise. "What are you doing here?" he finished with a stiff, stupid smile.

"I'm sorry, Major," Michael answered seriously. "The matter's urgent. I want a word with you."

That foolish, mechanical smile faded clean away from Seymour's face. The hand which held the candle shook, and Michael could read in the man's eyes guilt and fear.

Michael was reminded of a clerk he had once defended for embezzlement, in his early days at the Bar. The man had once confessed to him his feelings when the police came for him. The words came flashing back into Michael's mind.

"I'd been afraid of every knock for weeks," he had said. "I couldn't sleep. And it's the always pretending nothing is wrong that wears you out. When they did come, I tell you, I was almost glad."

Seymour illustrated the whole of that poignant confession. He gave a deep sigh; then, "Come in, Carteret," he said more naturally, but his eyes had grown sullen and despondent.

So acutely aware of the man's feelings, Michael felt sorry for him.

"Major, I've not come as an enemy," he said quickly. "I've come as a friend. I want to talk to you, but particularly I want to talk to M-Miss Molly. Could you wake her? Tell her it's—it's very important."

The Major nodded, as he threw open the door of the little sitting-room.

"Forgive the dark for a moment," he said. "I'll call her, then fetch a lamp."

Michael stood in the cold, queer light of breaking day, full of perplexity. Seymour had looked so guilty. Heaven forbid that after all he—and Molly—should have known that they had been smuggling drugs.

Molly came to him almost before he realized it, pale-faced, the sleep hardly out of her eyes, her lithe body wrapped in a curiously incongruous dressing-gown of richly embroidered silk. Michael guessed how she had come by that expensive garment.

She placed a lamp on the table.

"Well," she asked coldly, "what have you come for? Father said you were a friend, but are you?"

"I want to be," he answered simply.

She looked puzzled, confused, like a child half afraid, half trusting.

"If it's bad news, get it over quickly," she said.

He looked her straight in the face, and her brave blue eyes never wavered.

"You ran a cargo last night," he said in a level voice. "I want that cargo."

"Then find it," she broke in with a shrill, unnatural laugh. "If you know so much, Mr. Carteret——"

"Molly, I know so much more than you imagine," he interrupted patiently. "I know you were at Dyke and what you wirelessed when I left last night. You were tired and you wanted the boat."

The blue eyes opened wide in amazement, but never a flicker of fear came into them.

"And I suppose you heard all those other messages we sent out to fool you," she said gaily. "The boat, and here, and all the rest of our game. Oh, we had a merry time at your expense last night. Even Mr.

Ray enjoyed it; father had him over to dinner, you know—to join in the fun."

"And did Dr. Adam enjoy it too?" Michael asked.

For the instant he was partly convinced that they had fooled him after all, but the consternation that Molly could not hide reassured him.

"Oh, he?" she said in confusion.

"Yes, Molly; the dog that attacked me at Dyke and then kept me drugged in my bed at The Warren for days. He'd surely enjoy the joke."

The pale face flushed, and now her eyes dropped.

"What do you mean about drugging you?" she demanded angrily.

"Just that," he said. "That was why I was ill."

"What proof have you to make such a horrible charge?"

"When I stopped the medicine I stopped being ill. If you remember, you made me take a dose of that tonic once——"

Molly was on her feet, her eyes blazing.

"Do you believe I knew anything about it?" she asked with an effort.

"No," he said quietly, "nor do I believe you know what is contained in that cargo you ran last night. Silks and frocks galore, Molly, but also—drugs."

"It's a lie. Why do you say these things? You don't fool me like that, Mr. Carteret." Again the shrill, uncertain voice. Her face showed plainly that she was shaken.

"I tell you, Molly, that Sophie Vizard's chain of shops sell not only her smuggled silks, but cocaine. And you know what that hellish drug means."

Molly never took her eyes from his, and she sank back into her chair wearily. He was astonished at the extraordinary control she kept over herself. She spoke very seriously, but with no hesitation in her voice.

"You've told too much to stop now, Mr. Carteret," she said. "Tell me what else you know."

He told her Ellen's story, though without names. He told her of his belief of what happened when Adam attacked him at Dyke, and he saw her bite her lips.

"How much of that had you guessed, Molly?" he asked, as of a friend.

Her voice was less even now.

"I only knew that it wasn't the dog," she answered in the deep, husky note that came to her when she spoke softly. "I—I was at Dyke when you were there, but I didn't want you to know. And when you'd gone I found Hector, the dog, fast asleep, so drowsy that I couldn't wake him. I knew it wasn't his fault. I wasn't sure——"

He took a chance shot.

"You were hiding in that room in the chimney, I suppose," he said.

"You knew that?" she asked quickly.

"I've guessed it," he replied.

She sat for some moments deep in thought. Then: "What do you expect me to do?" she asked.

"Tell me where that cargo is. I want it," he said.

"Why?"

"To be the final evidence against that man who has trapped you into doing this thing. Molly, that man must be a fiend incarnate. I hope to God you don't know what I know about him."

She went to the door and called to her father. "Tell him," she said to Michael, nodding towards the Major. "Daddy, if Mr. Carteret's story is true, I—I think I wish I had never been born," she said with a sob.

Seymour looked wild-eyed and scared. He had dressed.

"What is it?" he asked hoarsely.

Michael told him, and he could see that his words meant more, far more, to the father than they had to the girl. Where she had betrayed a growing shame in her wonder, the Major's face darkened with anger.

"Give me your proofs, man, and I don't care what happens to me, I'm with you. God help Molly! We'll have to keep her out of it somehow, but I'll face the music without squealing, to see these devils punished," he declared with passion.

Molly went across to her father.

"Foolish father!" she said. "You can't keep me out, because I won't be kept out. And anyhow, I'd stand up to anything to prove we knew nothing of what we were really doing. Mr. Carteret, you must help us to do that."

The Major was still staring stubbornly at Michael.

"What's your part in this business?" he asked sharply. "Have you done this off your own bat?"

"I've been helping Mr. Pell," said Michael.

"Mr. Pell? Was it he all along?"

"It was."

"But who is he—a detective?"

"No." Michael checked for an instant. "No; Mr. Pell is—is as anxious as I am to keep you out of this trouble. Mr. Pell's real name is—Berkley Morgan."

The Major's arms drew back in a quick gesture of incredulous amazement.

"Berkley Morgan!" he echoed. "But the man hates me."

Molly looked on like a woman in a dream.

"My uncle!" she whispered.

Michael got up.

"Major," he said, "you'll find your brother-in-law with a motor-bicycle at your own gate. Why not go out to him? He can tell you far more than I can."

With obvious reluctance the Major rose and walked from the room. Molly and Michael sat in silence until they heard him return, talking in hard, stilted tones, to which Mr. Pell replied in his crisp, confident manner. The two men went upstairs.

Molly had been sitting looking blankly into some far distance. She started at the sound of her uncle's voice.

"Is that—that really him?" she asked.

"Yes."

"I thought I'd never seen him in all my life. And yet he was—little Mr. Pell?" A queer pathetic smile crossed her face.

"He was little Mr. Pell," Michael repeated.

She slipped from her chair and went across to the door. With her fingers on the handle, she turned, still smiling bravely.

"So the war is over, Mr. Carteret," she said. "I'm glad, so glad. But I won. You never stopped that cargo."

There was something delightfully impudent in her words. In the very face of threatening ruin she could laugh.

"You won," he smiled back at her. "And I admit defeat. But I, too, am glad the war is over—so glad, Molly. We'll fight together from now on, won't we?" he asked eagerly.

Sadness came slowly into those rebellious blue eyes.

"What, fight with a girl who's been—drug-running?" she asked bitterly.

"Don't say that," he broke in. "It's not true——"

"True or not true, that's what they'll all say," she said; then she slammed the door behind her as she ran from the room.

Michael crossed to the window and pulled back the heavy curtains. It was daylight now, and a dazzling watery sun had risen over the sea.

He stood staring unseeingly at the dreary, neglected garden, shrivelled by frosts and snow and winter rains. He felt a dull disappointment growing in his heart.

The scandal must come out now—much of it, anyhow—try as he and Mr. Pell would to check it. Indeed, he could not see how it was possible to check it. Molly and her father might be saved the full consequences of their actions, but the shame would remain.

"True or not true, that's what they'll all say," Molly had cried in her bitterness.

Well, let them say it. He would show the world what he thought of it—if only Molly would listen to him. He would beg her to marry him, and if she would but say yes . . .

Mr. Pell came bustling into the room to stir him from his reverie. The little man was brisk and confident as ever.

"It's all right," he said with a nod of satisfaction. "Poor Seymour, he's badly shaken at the moment. Molly's the best person to deal with him. They'll see that cargo's not moved. Gad! but it was clever, devilish clever; impudent."

Mr. Pell smiled as if he thoroughly enjoyed the joke.

"What was?" asked Michael.

"The way they fooled us; and all that imp Molly's idea, too. The cunning little wretch! What a nice niece to have, Carteret!"

His complete unconcern reassured Michael; Mr. Pell had a wonderful way of infecting his companions with his own confidence. "But come along, my dear fellow; you and I have a big job ahead, and I want to be out of this neighbourhood as soon as possible. The less gossip there is the better."

He glanced at his watch. "And we've no time to waste, either," he added. "We've got to get that nine o'clock train."

Reluctantly Michael followed the little man. He had been hoping that he could remain at the Grange for a time. He wanted so much to see Molly. But Mr. Pell was insistent.

They hurried through the village, Michael lost in moody thought in the side-car, Mr. Pell, his stern mouth just touched with a smile of relief, throwing an occasional word or two to his silent companion as they went along.

As they reached the short hill leading up to the breezy, bracken-covered waste of Hithe Heath, Michael roused himself.

"Where is the cargo?" he asked.

Mr. Pell chuckled.

"I'm going to show you," he said. "I think we've just time."

A few minutes later he turned the combination from the road, and ran bumpily along a grassy track to the brow of the slope.

Beneath them were the marshes, fringing the wide expanse of the harbour glistening in the morning sun. Away to the right, across the water Salthithe showed distinctly, a background of trees with the church and the castle flanking a picturesque medley of red brick houses.

"See that boat just on with the point now?" asked Mr. Pell.

Michael gazed at the distant speck. "Ray's launch, you mean," he answered.

"Not exactly," said Mr. Pell with an appreciative grin, "but one just like it, even to the red streak, the name, and the outboard motor. A double, in fact."

Michael's eyes opened wide.

"She crawled in with the tide about two this morning, and the original *Jaz Jaz* crawled out. This boat is packed with our cargo. Neat, don't you think?"

"Well, I'm hanged! But tell me——"

Mr. Pell was turning the bicycle.

"Plenty of time on the way," he laughed. "At the moment we must hurry on. We hope to call on Lady Sophie before lunch-time, Carteret."

## III.

It was like a spring morning in London. The big shopping streets were crowded with idlers.

The baskets of the flower-girls at Piccadilly Circus were crammed with early tulips as Michael and Mr. Pell drove through from Liverpool Street. They dismissed their cab at the corner of Dover Street and walked along the sunny pavement.

Mr. Pell's face was grim now, and Michael looked worried. There was so much to think about, so much to hope for, so much to fear.

Boldly, Mr. Pell rang the doorbell of Madame England's unassumingly opulent establishment and demanded, of the answering servant, an interview with madame.

The man, a little bewildered and not at all approving of these unusual callers, was afraid that madame was engaged. Had they an appointment?

Mr. Pell was perfectly bland but insistent.

"Take madame my card; she will see me. Carteret, have you a card too?"

The man gazed at the cards. "Sir Berkley Morgan, Mr. Michael Carteret," he murmured aloud. He was much more respectful now. "Will you come this way, please?" he said.

Michael felt horribly embarrassed to find himself in Sophie's wonderful showroom, with its black-clad, silent-footed assistants casting curious glances at the two intruders as they flitted about among the customers.

But Mr. Pell was perfectly at ease, undisturbed by questioning stares as he smiled benignly upon the whole world. Nor did he seem in the least conscious of his crumpled tweeds, as Michael was of his mud-stained clothes and none too clean old raincoat.

They sat waiting, in a corner near the door, upon a glorious old settee of Chippendale design, upholstered in rich brocade.

Michael was uncomfortably expectant. He was to witness an act of human drama such, perhaps, as never had been played before. It was not a welcome experience that lay ahead.

As his eyes fell upon the scores of delicate frocks hung negligently about the place, or being displayed by deftly cunning hands to supercilious women, his mind went back to that motor-boat at her moorings at the mouth of Walm River. She was probably packed with such fragile garments—and drugs.

It was all so strange, this connection between the desolate marshes and this warm and dainty centre of supreme luxury. Molly had been here, he supposed. He tried to picture her in these surroundings, clad, as he had known her, in fisherman's jersey and sea-boots.

What an astounding girl she was! And the subtlety of her plan as Mr. Pell had described it to him. Entirely her own idea, Pell had said. The two motor-boats, absolute doubles, for which purpose nothing could suit better than these old motor-launches made in war-time by the hundred, identical in every respect.

Molly had point-blank refused to run another cargo at Dyke because of Michael, so the two boats had been prepared. The one loaded with contraband, transferred from a French fishing-boat out at sea, had come into the harbour at the time Mr. Ray was careering across from Dyke to Street. She had anchored in the darkness under cover of Pool Island. Ray's boat had gone openly back to her moorings.

Then in the darkness of the morning, when all was safe, nosing her way up with the flood under her almost silent outboard motor, the boats had changed places, and the original *Jaz Jaz* was clear of the harbour long before dawn.

It was so simple. Many of the Salthithe fishing-boats had auxiliary engines. No one would give a second thought even had they heard the gentle pulsations of the M.L.'s outboard motor. And Dan Davis, in his own fishing-boat, had gone out, apparently in the ordinary course of his occupation, at the same time.

Mr. Pell stirred uneasily and brought Michael's roving thoughts back to the present.

"I don't like this delay," he whispered. He beckoned to one of the superior young ladies.

"Be good enough to remind madame that I am waiting," he said.

There was something commanding in Mr. Pell's voice that froze the half-formed excuse rising to the girl's lips. She scurried off.

Then Sophie herself appeared, Sophie aloof and forbidding, as she passed calmly through her customers to greet Mr. Pell and Michael in an easy, conventional way, as though their visit were most natural.

Her voice was raised so that those curious customers and inquisitive shopgirls might hear every word.

"Do come along to my office, Sir Berkley," she said. "I am so sorry to keep you waiting. It's good of you to have troubled to come here. And how are you, Mr. Carteret? Such ages since we met."

Sophie was going to put up a good fight. Her self-control won Michael's admiration. Only in the queer, grey-green eyes, so hard and lined at the corners, eyes that could not keep steady for one second, was there anything to betray the cold fear that oppressed Lady Sophie Vizard.

"Come along. It does seem so absurd to see you two men here among my lovely frocks. Such a waste! . . . Now, if only you were your sisters or wives——"

Sophie's voice was honeyed. Assistants and customers alike gazed at the strange trio with barely concealed surprise. Madame England had never before been known to unbend so much in her own, exquisite atelier.

The door closed, and Sophie commanded them with a careless gesture to sit down.

"Cigarettes by your side, Mr. Carteret," she said; "Mr. Pell"—she stressed the name with a tinge of sarcasm—"seldom smokes, I believe." Then, with the same wonderful bravado, she took a cigarette herself, lit it, and turned to the little man.

"Well, this isn't a friendly call, I know. What is it? Have you been playing policeman, Sir Berkley? It's your doing, whatever it is; Mr. Carteret's too much in love with Molly to cause trouble."

Mr. Pell's face became wooden. Michael saw in it, at that moment, the ominous immobility of the Orientals among whom he had lived for so long.

"It's your drug-running, Lady Sophie," he said abruptly.

The colour faded from Sophie's face. Not quickly; she flushed at first, then the blood seemed to evaporate, leaving her with ashy cheeks and big, dark-ringed, terrified eyes. She dropped into a chair, as though she had been smitten.

Mr. Pell went on like an automaton.

"I hold the cargo in the motor-boat at Salthithe; I have a witness who bought cocaine from your shop at Ipswich; I know Mr. Derek Holmes, otherwise Ray, and his record; I know all about Rafe Adam; and the sentence for trafficking in drugs, Lady Sophie, is, as perhaps you have considered—when you thought it worth the while to take the risk—considerable, though by no means commensurate with the moral devastation it causes."

"You beast!" Sophie gasped in an agonized whisper. "You spy! Cads—both of you!" She shrank into her chair.

"Maybe," replied Mr. Pell, unmoved. "But hysterical rage won't help, Lady Sophie. I have seen too much of the hellish curse of drugs to feel the slightest pity for those who purvey them. Just ponder this, as calmly as you can. You are now on the brink of a long term of imprisonment. With it comes complete and utter ruin and ignominy. You do realize that, don't you?"

In Michael's brain, reason and sentiment warred feverishly. It was so hard to accept the fact that this terrified, cultured woman most thoroughly deserved the pitiless treatment with which Mr. Pell threatened her.

Sophie read some compassion in his face. She appealed to him in a frenzy of despair.

"Mr. Carteret, you won't let this man do this," she pleaded. "He's callous, brutal. If I have done wrong, I didn't mean to; I was forced. And—and"—a swift gleam of hope rushed to her face—"and, if he does what he says, Molly will suffer, too. You wouldn't like that. She'd go to prison—and Major Seymour. And you'd be mixed up in the scandal. You knew what we were doing; Molly said so. I'd swear it in court. Think of your father—and your career. Stop him, stop him, Mr. Carteret. I'll pay—anything. I'll give all I've got to a hospital. Don't let him ruin Molly——"

"Lady Sophie." Mr. Pell's voice came like the call of some inexorable fate. "Lady Sophie, be quiet."

Sophie broke off in the middle of a sentence and crouched back, cowed.

"Lady Sophie, you want to save your skin, don't you?"

"Yes," she answered with utter frankness, hope in her voice again.

"You can have twenty-four hours to save it—on certain terms," said Mr. Pell.

Sophie's eyes fixed on Mr. Pell's face, submissive and anxious.

There came a knock at the door. Sophie started. "Oh, don't—don't let them come in," she cried.

Michael was on his feet in an instant, possessed by some power beyond himself. He went to answer the summons.

"Don't let anybody interrupt us for a few moments, Lady Sophie," he heard himself saying in a casual way that amazed him. "What?"—to a respectful

Miss Gidding, then: "Lady Sophie, may I send your secretary away?"

Mildly sentimental Miss Gidding was charmed by the good-looking stranger's intimate, pleasant smile as he answered, a moment later: "Lady Sophie says I may tell you to come back later; she's entertaining old friends who won't let her do any work for a little while."

He went back to his chair, with that forced, mechanical smile still fixed upon his face. Mr. Pell went on as if he had never been interrupted.

"The terms are," he said, "a full and complete confession of Robert Sark's complicity in this business."

Michael jerked forward as if a blow had struck him.

"Sark!" he gasped. "Is that the man you're after? Good God, Pell! You don't mean that? Sir Robert Sark?"

"The wickedest man in England," was Mr. Pell's savage comment.

### IV.

Subdued, almost sad, Michael and Mr. Pell found themselves in the bright sunshine of Dover Street an hour later.

Sophie Vizard had surrendered ignominiously. She had thrown every consideration to the winds in a frenzied panic to save herself. Mr. Pell had in his pocket a damning document that would leave Robert Sark no ghost of a chance of escape.

In her terror, Sophie had involved him to the utmost; told of his controlling interest in the Albion Frock Company; told of her own experience of his nursing homes; admitted that she recommended 'likely' customers to consult him, and gave a host of other incriminating details.

Mr. Pell hailed a cab. "Now for a less painful, but much more difficult, task," he said.

Their cab had hardly turned from Dover Street before Sark himself drove up to Madame England's. He had spent half an hour trying to get Sophie on the telephone, only to be told again and again, by an adamant Miss Gidding, that madame was still engaged and could speak to nobody.

Even Sark's patience gave way under the strain of suspense. The expected 'all clear' message had not come from Adam, nor could he get him on the telephone. With an oath, when for the last time he failed to get Lady Sophie, he had taken a cab to find out for himself what hitch had arisen.

He found a dazed, distracted Sophie, and his fears instantly quickened.

"Why am I forced to come down here?" he asked roughly. "You know I always wish to avoid it."

Sophie gazed at him blankly.

"I—I was busy."

"Busy—rubbish. In future you will tell your secretary that you are never too busy to talk to me. Understand that, please."

The cruel, bullying note in his voice roused Sophie's anger. Her wild hatred of Mr. Pell and Michael surged into a new channel and directed itself upon this visitor. She gave a harsh, mocking laugh. At least, she could hurt the man once before she left.

"I will if you like," she said, "but it won't do you any good. I shall have no secretary after to-night; nor will you, probably, be in a position to talk to one."

He stepped swiftly across the room and clutched her brutally by the wrist.

"Now, what do you mean by that?" he demanded in a low, steel-hard voice that terrified her. There was cold anger in the flinty eyes, and he towered above her like some giant idol miraculously endued with animation.

"I—mean," she stammered, "that it's all up. They've got our cargo. They know everything—everything."

"Who knows?" Sark's face darkened, and the strong jaws snapped out the question viciously.

"Pell—and Carteret. They were here not five minutes ago."

"Those two! Well, we can soon stop their mouths. Both of them I could certify insane to-morrow."

"But the cargo?"

"Where is it?"

"Still in the launch."

"Telephone Seymour at once to run that launch out to sea and scuttle it."

"It's too late. The Seymours have gone back on us. They're holding it."

"So much the worse for Seymour," said Sark grimly.

Sophie recovered her courage once more.

"It's no good talking like that," she said. "I tell you, we are beaten. You're beaten at last. You can't fight this thing out. You don't know what you're up against."

"Pell and Carteret." He spoke the names derisively.

"Yes. But do you know who Pell is? He is Berkley Morgan—*the* Berkley Morgan."

For the first time in the years she had known him, Sophie saw that Robert Sark was shaken.

"Damn Berkley Morgan!" he said. "I don't care who he is; I'll beat him."

Sophie braced herself, as if expecting a blow to follow her next words. Nor, indeed, did she care much if it did; it would be worth anything to get this one stab in at him.

But she backed away as she spoke. "You can sneer as much as you like at Berkley Morgan, Sir Robert," she jeered, "but he's got you and every bit of your history for years. He knows all about the homes, and your holding in the company——"

"I don't care what he knows; there's not one scrap of evidence. I've never written a word, and none of you dare speak against me. You're in it deeper than I am."

"Yes—but I told him—all I know," she threw at him with hatred.

"You told him? You've confessed?"

Robert Sark looked hardly human as he spat out the words. His upper lip was raised in a snarl, those usually expressionless eyes had narrowed, and his great jaw was thrust forward.

"Yes, I've confessed, I tell you; I've told him everything I could. You don't think I'm going down alone, do you? It's ruin, sheer, hopeless ruin for me, and you're not going to escape. Oh, you were very clever, weren't you?" she taunted. "I warned you about Carteret, and you laughed. You said it was a good thing to get a hold on the son of a Judge. Well, he's got a hold on you now. You said Molly Seymour could turn the young fool's head. He's turned hers, you see, just as I said he would. And now everything's gone smash, gone to hell. They've been after us for weeks. They've got a customer who bought the stuff at Ipswich; they know how you treat your likely patients; they know exactly what a foul humbug you are; and you're the man they're after."

Sophie was fast losing control of herself. Haggard and wild-eyed, she sobbed in her passion.

"So that's that, and you know now." Her voice rose hysterically. "And I wish to God I'd never set eyes on you, damn you! And you and Adam and Holmes and the Seymours and all the rest of your dupes can go to hell! So now get out—get out of the country if you're wise. Go! Go!" She almost screamed out the words.

Sark looked apprehensively at the door. He picked up his hat.

"Woman," he said in a hard, cruel voice, "you're a fool, a dangerous fool. I shall punish you for this."

He turned and went from the room, and Sophie fell exhausted to the sofa.

Ten minutes later a cab drove up to Sir Robert Sark's gaunt house in Harley Street. Sark emerged and paid off the driver.

No unusual emotion showed on his expressionless face as he handed his hat to the manservant who flung open the door for him.

"Any messages?" he asked curtly.

"Two gentlemen 'ave been waiting some time to see you, sir. Said you would know them—Mr. Bernard Pell and a Mr. Carteret. The latter 'as been 'ere before."

"Quite right," Sark growled. "Say I'll see them in a moment."

"Sir Robert 'as returned, sir, and will see you in a moment," the man repeated obediently to Michael and Mr. Pell a few seconds later.

Mr. Pell nodded. As the door closed, Michael heard a deep sigh, as of content, from the little man. For his own part he was jumpy. The long wait had played havoc with his nerves. Mr. Pell had been taciturn, and the great, silent house had seemed to exude mystery and omen.

Five minutes passed, minutes that dragged out their laggard seconds intolerably. Mr. Pell, immersed in his own thoughts, sat, with furrowed brow, gazing at the carpet. Michael's eyes ranged the room restlessly.

And then, suddenly, Sark himself appeared, a huge grim figure set like a picture framed in the mahogany of the door.

"Do you both want to see me?" he asked in his emotionless, metallic voice. The flinty eyes moved slowly and unafraid from Michael to his companion.

Mr. Pell jumped to his feet.

"Both," he answered quickly.

"Come, then," said Sark, with a gesture of his long, powerful arm.

He went on ahead, and when they followed into his consulting-room he was already seated at the shabby writing-desk, a little pile of papers before him. Unbidden, Michael and Mr. Pell sat down.

"You've guessed what I've come about," said Mr. Pell in a harsh tone, without preliminary.

"I never guess," Sark answered, unmoved.

"You know, then."

"Perfectly."

Michael found himself shrinking back in his chair, overawed at the bitterness in the two voices.

"You know who I am?" Mr. Pell went on.

Sark tapped the papers in front of him.

"I have your case here," he said, his eyes shifting just an instant from the little man's face to the documents on the table.

"What is that?" Mr. Pell rapped out.

"Adam's report on your treatment, and Dr. Morgan's report when he sent you to him."

Sark was even and soulless as a machine. His imperturbability seemed to shake Mr. Pell for the moment.

"Oh, that!" he said with a touch of impatience. "I mean you know my real name?"

"I am not in the least curious; I accept your own doctor's word." The specialist fingered the papers idly.

"Well, I'm Berkley Morgan, and—it's no good fencing, Sark; you know well enough my object——"

The doctor's face showed just a trace of amusement as he broke in:

"Pray don't get heated, Morgan. I know your object, but you won't carry it out."

"Believe me, you make a great mistake."

Mr. Pell was clearly angry.

"I make few mistakes," said Sark, pushing back his chair and staring, wooden-faced, straight into the little man's eyes. "You overestimate yourself Morgan; you are not now among your Chinks and niggers. You are in civilization—a bad nervous case, almost a border-line case, I should put it. You suffer delusions—a common symptom. Dr. Morgan's report speaks of a former addiction to drugs—again common in the East. Dr. Adam has noted it too. No, no. Your evidence would be of no great value. You must see that."

There was an insolent finality about Sark's tone that shook Michael's confidence.

"That we will shortly put to the test," Mr. Pell retorted more calmly now. "Meanwhile it may interest you to know that I have a very full confession from Lady Sophie Vizard."

"So she told me," Sark nodded. "Poor woman! She has been a patient of mine for years. And of what worth do you think her confession is? An advanced neurotic, at times not responsible for her actions. Driven clearly out of her sanity at your discovery of her illegal trading, obviously she would confess anything to save herself. Neurotics so often accuse their doctors of crimes, you know. We may dismiss poor Lady Sophie's frenzied story."

"You may," said Mr. Pell grimly, "but I doubt if the jury will."

Again the flicker of a smile, contemptuous and taunting, crossed the doctor's heavy face.

"There will be no jury," he answered sharply. "Take my advice now and forget the whole of this foolish affair. If you don't——"

"Well?"

Mr. Pell was leaning forward, his lips tight drawn, the chin thrust forward a trifle in a belligerent way, and the, sometimes so mild, brown eyes wider open and hard behind the round glasses. Sark seemed to read the challenge in his opponent's face, and his own manner responded to it.

"This will happen," he rasped out, raising a sinewy hand, forefinger outstretched, in a menacing movement as he leaned over the desk.

The immobility had gone from his face now. Cruelty and hatred played in the flint-grey eyes that glinted beneath bushy brows.

"Attend carefully. Ultimately, Berkley Morgan's name will be remembered, not as a great administrator, but as a poor witless madman. I swear to you, Morgan, if you go on with this I'll have you inside an asylum. And Carteret too."

Michael winced.

"I can do it, man. Do you think I haven't prepared for something of this kind for years?" He gave an eerie laugh of contempt. "You go on with this business, and all you'll prove is that Sophie Vizard and Adam were mixed up in a smuggling enterprise, that Seymour and his daughter helped them. And I'll see to it that it's clearly shown that they knew exactly what they were running. The drugs, I mean. You can raise that scandal if you like. But think of this: Who will be in the dock? Not Adam or Sophie; they'll both be safely away before your policemen begin to move. No, your brother-in-law, Seymour, and your niece will be left to face the music. They'll get the full brunt of it. You fool to think you could trap me! Now are you going to drop it? Decide quickly; I'm a busy man, and I've no more time to waste on my patient's delusions."

Sark sat upright again and glanced casually at his watch.

Michael gazed on the scene bewildered and doubting. Sark's manner carried such enormous conviction. The agility of the man's brain was baffling. His plan, as he stated it, sounded all too logical. Molly would be dragged into a repulsive scandal, and, what was worse, into a horrible and degrading prosecution.

His legal mind was swiftly reviewing every aspect of the case. Sark's defence would take a lot of shaking. Michael knew his British juries and their blind faith in doctors' evidence, and he knew enough of Sark, now, to surmise that the man had been cunning enough to shield himself in every possible way. Here, in the Salthithe affair, it would seem clear that Adam would be made the scapegoat. Sark was right, too, when he said that Sophie's confession would carry little weight. The man would swear that she was not rational, and who was to doubt such an authority? Sophie would have fled.

He became horribly uneasy, too, as he recalled Sark's threat to have him and Mr. Pell in an asylum. After all, the man was among the greatest alienists in the country. The world would have little doubt if Sir Robert Sark stated that two of his patients, 'border-line cases'—the phrase came back to him—obsessed with the delusions of insanity, had accused him of a monstrous crime.

Michael looked anxiously across at Mr. Pell. Was the little man beaten? Why didn't he make some reply?

Mr. Pell was smiling—inanely, Michael thought—as he gazed quite calmly into the defiant eyes of the specialist.

Sark rapped out, like a drill sergeant: "Well, decide."

"Oh, were you waiting for me?" said Mr. Pell with affected surprise.

"I was. I have offered you your choice."

His gaze fixed eagerly upon the doctor's face, Michael thought he saw some subtle change coming over it. It looked a little less tense, the firm, hard contours had grown grosser.

Mr. Pell's eyebrows lifted. "Don't be stupid, Sark," he said impatiently.

The doctor flushed as if the words had stung him. His hand went out to the telephone.

"Then I shall ring the police," he said in a hard monotone. "It's not the first time I've had to bring them here to deal with blackmailing and threatening neurotics. They understand."

Mr. Pell removed his glasses and polished them.

Sark went on, more savagely now: "It is my duty to give them the information about Adam and Sophie Vizard's drug-running business, which I have just learned from you." He relaxed for a second into a cynical smile. "And although they may lose the chief principals they will at least get the Seymours under lock and key to-night."

Michael started, involuntarily, from his chair, but Mr. Pell quieted him with a wave of the hand.

"And then," Sir Robert went on thoughtfully, "I shall tell the inspector—it will be Chrome, I expect—your condition, and that you have some extraordinary allegation to make against me. He will know what to expect—and how to treat you. He's very tactful."

Mr. Pell turned easily to Michael.

"Don't let this man impress you," he said in a casual way. "He's bluffing—playing for time. He's hoping he can get the four o'clock boat-train from Victoria. But he won't." He turned sharply to Sark. "All right, ring," he added, "and while we wait we will discuss that nursing home at Bournemouth, and your private hospital in Gloucester Road that Nurse Lear manages for Dr. Munning. Who is Dr. Munning, by the way? Mrs. Lear was a little indefinite when I saw her just after Christmas. Mrs. Lear, you remember, went away recently for a holiday—with your permission, I understand—but on my advice, Sark. Like Lady Sophie, she talked, on paper, before she went. And then there is Mr. Upton of the Albion Frock Company, a big shareholder, a ghost, shall we say, of Sir Robert Sark. We must find Mr. Upton—and what happens to his cheques. No, Sark, you can drop all this bluff; it won't do. I've been after you for months, and I've caught you at last."

Sark sat motionless. More than ever his resemblance to some huge idol appealed to Michael. Presently he broke the acute silence.

"So you're determined to have your scandal, are you? Well, you shall have it," he said slowly. The words came in a deeper note. He played idly with his chain, then glanced once again at his watch. "A scandal that shall satisfy even a prying policeman's soul," he went on ominously.

He raised his hand deliberately to his face, when Michael was startled to see Mr. Pell leap from his chair and dash across to the desk.

"Ring, Carteret, ring! The man's ill!" he cried in a staccato voice.

Sir Robert Sark had suddenly crumpled. He was gasping. The blood had left his face, which had taken on a strange, dirty ivory hue. The eyes were closed and the hands twitching.

Michael, alarmed and shocked, his hand pressed on the bell, saw the huge shoulders sway and droop, the great square head sink forward on to the desk, and Mr. Pell trying vainly to support the limp form.

With bored expression, Sark's correct servant entered the room.

"Fetch a doctor, quick," Mr. Pell said. "Your master's ill."

The man started to life. "Oh, my God!" he gasped.

He had gone in a second, and Michael went across to the desk.

Mr. Pell looked up, worried but calm.

"The man's dead now," he said in a queer, low voice. "Carteret, let me do the talking. If there's an inquest, not one word of why we came here must come out. We're ordinary patients come on ordinary business. We may stop the scandal yet."

"Yes, of course. But this is very—very terrible," Michael answered, horrified and shaken.

"Terrible! Nothing of the kind," said Mr. Pell brusquely. "A foul and evil man has cheated human justice, that's all."

The door burst open. Hatless, a stranger dashed into the room, followed by the scared servant. He went straight to the crumpled form and made a swift examination. Then he stood back, grave and obviously greatly moved.

"It's over. He's dead," he said with bowed head. "Poor Sark! A tremendous loss, gentlemen. He's been threatened with this for months. Only this morning I warned him to take a rest. A wonderful personality, Sir Robert. He cured others—himself he would never trouble about. The world can ill afford to lose so great a man." He paused for a moment. "Will you help me?"

"Of course," said Mr. Pell instantly.

They moved the lifeless form and covered it decently.

"I trust we can save an inquest," the strange doctor went on. "Sark has consulted me from time to time about his heart. And now, gentlemen, if we went into another room you would perhaps tell me exactly what happened. You were present, I assume."

"Yes, doctor," said Mr. Pell quietly. "I will tell you the circumstances—such as there is to tell."

And silently they filed out from that tragic, dingy room.

* * * * *

Michael and Mr. Pell sat facing one another in the dining-car of the last train back to Chipping Langham that night. Neither had much appetite for food, nor much desire now to talk. The natural result of hours of immense strain was obvious in each.

After a long, long silence, Michael asked with apparent irrelevance:

"I suppose it was his heart? Somehow, I hope so—it seems so terrible—even for a man like that."

"Let us hope so," said Mr. Pell wearily. He reverted once more to a thoughtful silence.

But as he spoke, there was in his pocket a tiny white tablet which he had, unnoticed, picked up from beneath Sir Robert's dead hand.

Sir Berkley Morgan, criminologist, knew well enough how Sark had died. An analysis would tell him soon what exactly was the poison the man used in the end.

## CHAPTER XIII

### I.

SALTHITHE was wonderful. There was not a fisherman who sailed Walm Harbour who had not an idea of what had been going on at Dyke. But the word had been passed that something had gone wrong, and that Mr. Pell and Michael were to be regarded as friends.

And the fisherfolk of the harbour, loyal to a man to Molly, were yet a little nervous about their own complicity in the smuggling. There was a new warmth in the 'Mornin', sir,' of the tan-faced, blue-jerseyed men who lounged by with their slow, rolling gait, as a car bearing Mr. Pell and Michael pulled up by the drive of The Warren the next morning.

"You don't want to come in," said Mr. Pell. "Go on down to the quay and get a boat to put us across to Street. I'll join you as soon as I can."

Mr. Pell paid off the car and entered The Warren; Michael hurried toward the narrow, red-brick, little street that led down to the water side.

In the shelter, by the ferry, old Dan Davis was smoking idly.

"Mornin' to you, sir," he said in reply to Michael's casual greeting. "Major Seymour was saying that 'twas likely you'd be going over to-day, and the boat's all ready if you were wanting it, sir."

"Right," said Michael, hiding his surprise. "I shall be wanting it, but not for a bit; I'm waiting for Mr. Pell." He cast an anxious eye down stream to where the motor-boat should have been at anchor. She had gone.

The old fisherman read the question in his eyes.

"You'd be looking for that there noisy craft of Mr. Ray's, sir," he announced in a matter-of-fact voice. "She's lying off Street now. Mr. Ray, sir, he's—gone away for a time." Dan took his pipe from his mouth and spat reflectively into the water. "Queer gentleman, Mr. Ray, sir," he went on coolly. "We fishin' chaps have heard as he weren't honest. They're saying in the village as he's let the Major down. When it come to paying his rent there was some trouble. At least, that's what they do say; I don't know that there's any truth in it."

Michael was staggered by the effrontery of the man. Yet there was humour in it, delicious humour. So this was the story the country was going to put out to account for Ray's disappearance.

"Well, you never can tell, Davis," Michael said with a questioning smile.

Old Dan looked at him slyly, and the weather-stained cheeks just wrinkled in understanding about the clear, innocent eyes.

"Let's hope not, sir," he said. "Lots of harm comes of telling, sometimes."

He knocked out his pipe and wandered off to get the boat ready, and Michael dropped into a seat in the shelter and gave himself up to wonder. As Molly had once told him, it would be a heart-breaking job to try to extract any evidence from these people, he realized. Their bucolic stupidity cloaked a cunning intelligence.

Mr. Pell joined him.

"It's positively amazing," he said. "By rights the whole place ought to be seething with gossip, but not a soul, but a few of the neurotics at The Warren, seem to think anything unusual has occurred. And they are concerned about 'poor Dr. Adam.'" Mr.

Pell mimicked Miss Collins' affected voice. "Frankly, Carteret, I'm beginning to believe that the entire population was mixed up in this smuggling business."

He gave Michael a brief summary of the information he had gleaned at the house. Rafe Adam had been called away suddenly on the previous afternoon —'to an urgent consultation in town that may keep him several days,' said Mr. Pell with a grin. Old Dr. Cheyney, who had qualified in the early 'seventies, and who regarded 'nerves' as a matter for a 'straight talking to' rather than for medical treatment, was ruling, temporarily, in Adam's stead.

Dan Davis, from the slimy, weed-covered steps called out: "All ready when you are, sir."

"Come on," said Mr. Pell, "let's get over and see what news Seymour has. He was to get rid of Ray, and stop local gossip, somehow."

"He's done it," Michael responded with a laugh. "Salthithe is most worried about Mr. Ray; they've heard tell—so Dan tells me sadly—that he wasn't quite honest."

"Wonderful race!" said Mr. Pell appreciatively.

A few moments later he was talking to Dan Davis in his old, prim, timid way about black-headed gulls, and Dan, as he answered respectfully, "You're right, sir, they'll all be showing their spring feathers soon," looked up with childlike guilelessness at Michael and solemnly winked.

## II.

Face to face with Molly at the Grange, Michael felt gauche and ill at ease. But for a smile of conventional greeting, she almost ignored him.

Though he sat with Mr. Pell, Molly, and her father in that upper room, with its heavy curtains, its polished wireless set, and its ebon loud speaker, that seemed to glower at him, Cyclops-like, from a corner table, Michael felt an interloper.

Mr. Pell told of Sark's end. "His doctor neighbour spoke of long-standing heart trouble," he said. "It is even possible that may avert an inquest."

Seymour nodded. "I hope so; it will save us a deal of trouble. And Sophie Vizard?" he queried after a pause.

"Gone," said Mr. Pell. "Gone into oblivion. I find it hard to feel anything but rancour towards that woman."

Molly spoke up with a strange bitterness.

"Sophie will land on her feet all right," she put in. "She's had a funk hole ready in Paris for months past. She's told me so. And she's got money over there. Ten to one she and Derek Holmes are sitting over lunch now, laughing at us. With Dr. Adam there too, probably. They feathered their nest softly enough. Except that she was a coward, Sophie was less like a fool than anyone I ever knew."

"What has happened to Ray and Adam?" Michael asked a little later.

"I should say they were on the Channel boat from Newhaven last night," the Major replied.

Mr. Pell sat back in his chair with a quizzical smile.

"The rats didn't take long to leave the sinking ship," he said. "But there's still the ship." He turned to Molly. "A quaint jest of Fate—after all our trouble to lay hands on it, that cargo's a positive danger to us now. Molly, you've got to get rid of the evidence; can you?"

A glint of the old devilment flashed into Molly's blue eyes.

"I'll look after that all right," she said, "and be glad to see the last of it. We'll give it back to the sea."

Mr. Pell leaned forward.

"My dear, the sooner you do that the better," he said. "Your people here are wonderfully loyal; but the best of us make mistakes sometimes."

Molly jumped to her feet. "All right," she answered.

Stupid and unwanted as he felt, Michael seized upon this as a Heaven-sent opportunity.

"I'll come with you," he announced positively. "I may be some use."

"Do," said Mr. Pell.

"As you like," Molly commented with a shrug of her shoulders.

Michael waited for her in the hall, and when she joined him, it was the girl of the marshes who came downstairs—Molly in her fisherman's jersey, her short skirt, and her high boots.

"You'll hate the job," she said shortly; "but if you want to come, come on."

Her brusqueness hurt him.

"I'm coming, whatever happens," he answered.

She led him by a side path down to the harbour shore, where a little sailing dinghy was drawn up on a stretch of shingly beach. He pulled her out to the launch, and soon, with engines roaring, they were in the harbour mouth and beyond, the boat pitching briskly as she crammed her nose into the choppy sea.

They were fully five miles off shore, with the low coast a faint blur in the mist astern, when Molly called to him to go forward and look out for a buoy.

Ten minutes passed, and he was conscious that something unusual was happening. The engines still roared on, but the boat seemed heavy and was steering wildly.

Molly's voice came to him tauntingly.

"Come on, Mr. Carteret; the job's done," she cried.

He turned. Molly was no longer at the wheel; she had hauled up the dinghy. "In you get quickly," she commanded.

Then it dawned on him.

"What have you done?"

"Only scuttled her," she answered with a smile. "But if you don't hurry, you'll be scuttled, too."

Already the launch was deep in the water. Molly had jumped to the dinghy and pulled it alongside. He scrambled in, and she let go.

*Jaz Jaz*—he could read her name plainly on the stern—forged ahead like a drunken thing. She yawed wildly. Then the engines spluttered and stopped.

"Why have you done this? Why didn't you tell me?" he asked. "I thought——"

"You thought we were going to throw everything overboard nicely and correctly, didn't you?" she answered, with a little catch in her voice. "Well, we weren't. Somehow, you always seem to forget that I'm a woman—with a woman's love of pretty clothes. Do you think I could have seen those—those lovely frocks just—just chucked away? I I couldn't, Mr. Carteret; I tell you that plainly. It hurts like mad now to think of the pretty things that are going down in that boat."

She laughed, but there was not all mirth in the laughter.

*Jaz Jaz* was settling down. She had stopped, and the sea was breaking over her. For what seemed like minutes she appeared to remain stationary, then, as though an unseen hand swept suddenly across the dancing waters to erase her, she sank from view.

Molly gave a cry.

"There goes the evidence in twelve fathoms," she said. For a moment they gazed blankly at the mysterious sea, then: "Help me to get the mast up, and I'll sail you back," she added.

As he obeyed, Michael felt ashamed. This girl was so competent and he so utterly useless. She sat there at the tiller, sad eyed, yet so confident.

But out of his shame grew a sudden courage of despair. He hardly realized that it was himself who was speaking as he said, almost roughly:

"Molly, you've got into my life too deeply ever to get out of it. You've made me love you, and you're going to marry me. You've got to—I'm going to make you love me."

"Is this—just kindness?" she asked, her eyes still fixed ahead.

"I love you," he answered simply.

"I shouldn't make at all a good wife for a rising young barrister," she replied, avoiding his gaze.

A madness seized him. He put out his hand and closed it upon hers on the tiller. The boat swung round, pitching dangerously in the cross sea.

"If I've got to argue with you," he said, "we'll stand out a bit—to Holland, if needs be. I'll argue all day—but I'll convince you in the end. Molly, you're going to marry me."

"You're going to drown me," she laughed nervously.

The boat went about on the other tack.

"You're going to marry me, Molly," he repeated.

"Molly could never marry you," she said in a voice so low that he could hardly hear it through the noise of the wind.

"Then Peggy will," he cried.

"Peggy always took chances," she answered, and she smiled up into his face. "She never quite knew why she did things. She doesn't know now. But——"

"You will! You dear!"

And quite simply, at immediate risk of swamping the tiny craft, Molly abandoned the tiller and gave herself up to his strong arms.

### III.

Left to themselves, Mr. Pell and his brother-in-law talked on gravely.

The Major's voice was harsh with anger when he told how, through Adam, he had been persuaded into the smuggling enterprise; of the first excitement; the appeal of the scheme as a means of extracting some retribution from a Government he felt so strongly had plundered him and his class shamefully.

And then the disillusionment, the discovery that it was Sark, not Sophie, who was the brain of the business—as Adam had at first said—Sark, a man he had respected as a great healer.

"But I didn't much care then," he said bitterly. "I was sickened, and I put him down as just one more high-placed, titled rogue. There were times even, when I admired the brute, his utter callousness, his strength. He rode roughshod over everything. Sophie told me that there was very little the matter with young Carteret. Sark wanted a Judge's son in his power, that was all That man was Satanic in his cleverness. But, by God! Berkley, if I'd known then what I know now I would have strangled him."

Mr. Pell listened sympathetically.

Seymour got up and wandered about the room restlessly. He was grey and jumpy; the spirit seemed to have gone out of the man.

Presently he stopped and said with bitterness:

"And now I've messed up Molly's life, just as I—I suppose I messed up her mother's. Berkley, what the devil can we do to get my girl out of this scandal?

Can't you take her away; it would be infinitely easier for me to face this trouble alone. I don't care what happens to me, but——"

"Don't be a fool, Seymour," said Mr. Pell sharply. "By the grace of God there'll be no scandal. Who's going to talk? Not your people down here. If there's an inquest on Sark, I'll do the talking there."

"But Sophie—and Adam? Things are bound to come out about them. You can't suddenly leave two businesses, so to speak, in the air. It's sure to come, Berkley, it's sure to come."

Mr. Pell sat back and laughed quietly.

"Will you stop fretting and leave this matter in my hands," he said. "I have appointed myself executor for that precious pair. I propose to go to Paris to-morrow; I'll see that they settle up their affairs in a—shall we say plausible fashion? For Heaven's sake pull yourself together, man! You'll have Molly back in a minute or two—with probably another shock for you."

Mr. Pell smiled blandly at his distracted brother-in-law.

His face drawn and pale, Seymour gazed blankly at the little man.

"I'm absolutely in your hands," he answered; "but for God's sake don't let Molly know what—what happened to her mother."

"If you're a fool, I'm not," said Mr. Pell with a gesture of impatience. "Get the chess-board and see if we can't get some sense into you over a game."

And at chess they were when Molly and Michael returned, soaked to the skin with spray.

Mr. Pell swung round in his chair.

"Got rid of the evidence?" he asked with a questioning smile.

"Yes, uncle," Molly answered, flushing. "But—

but I had to bribe a witness. Father"—she rushed her words—"father, I've brought home a young man."

The Major looked up from the board.

"What?" he asked. "What's that?"

Michael took a step forward, and he, too, knew that his cheeks were flushing.

"Molly has been good enough to say she'll marry me, sir," he said, conscious of the abruptness of his words.

Mr. Pell's brown eyes softened.

"D'ye hear that, Seymour?" he said in his crisp, commanding way. "She's off your hands."

Then the voice changed, and sheer mischief gleamed in those expressive eyes as he gazed, so innocently, at the embarrassed pair.

"Do you know," said the voice of the prim, diffident, little Mr. Pell, "I feel that spring is coming? The turtle-doves have returned to our shores."

THE END

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